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An Afternoon with Michael Shermer

Skeptics Society director visits Dallas to promote *Science Friction*

By Daniel R. Barnett

The North Texas Skeptics were given a treat on Sunday, April 3. Over 70 people showed up at the Barnes & Noble at Lincoln Park, just across from NorthPark Center in Dallas, to meet Skeptics Society director Michael Shermer, PhD, and hear him discuss his latest book, *Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown*.

The seats were filled, people crowded around the kiosks and bookshelves, and a few even took up positions behind the podium. It was 4:00pm. All we needed now was Shermer himself.

It turns out that on Saturday morning, Shermer was hit by a van during his morning bicycle workout regimen, badly bruising his hip and thigh. Fortunately, he was able to bike himself back home and prepare for the trip to Dallas.

Now, about that trip. Shermer's flight was delayed by a full hour. This meant that when his plane hit the tarmac at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, he only had 30 minutes to disembark, grab his luggage, find his ride, and travel all the way to the intersection of Northwest Highway and US 75 to make it to his lecture on time. It just wasn't going to happen.

Fortunately, Maureen Szostek and everyone else at Barnes and Noble were very helpful and accommodating, and they kept everyone in the crowd informed of all the



Michael Shermer just flew in from California, and...no, it's *not* a joke. He just did.

(Photo by Daniel Barnett)

EVENTS CALENDAR

May Program

Saturday, May 14, at 2 p.m.
Center for Community
Cooperation,
2900 Live Oak Street, Dallas

Ruel Macaraeg will present a
lecture on "Scientific Babelism"

Check the NTS Hotline or our
Web site for more information.

May Board of Directors/Social Meeting

Let us know if you are coming.
Send e-mail to
msselby@ntskeptics.org, or phone
214-335-9248. We sometimes can-
cel these events or even change the
location at the last minute.

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Prasad Golla gets his copy of *Science Friction* autographed by Shermer.

(Photo by Daniel Barnett)

latest developments. They stayed in contact with Shermer via his cell phone, who relayed his position to the staff on a periodic basis.

Finally, at around 4:25pm, Michael Shermer showed up at the front door of the bookstore, where he was quickly ushered in to the applause of his patient fans. And the Barnes and Noble staff gave him all the time he needed for his *Science Friction* lecture – and an autograph session afterwards.

Shermer spent approximately one hour discussing his book, which deals the process of turning skepticism upon science itself – a much headier subject than chasing down psychic fraudsters and creationist hucksters. Part of his lecture was the moving story of his mother's ill-fated battle with meningioma and how medical science was unable to save her; such patients often turn to unproven alternative cancer therapies when all else fails.

There were also many lighter moments, however, such as the time when Shermer gave the audience a quick demonstration of cold reading, which psychics such as John Edward apparently use to simulate receiving messages from the spirit world.

After the talk, Shermer gladly autographed his books for everyone in attendance – he also signed a copy of *Science Friction* for the North Texas Skeptics – and also signed another stack of books for those who weren't able to make it to the lecture. Then he retired to the Blue Mesa restaurant with members of the Skeptics Society and NTS for some stimulating conversation over drinks, salsa, and chips.

Thanks to everyone who was able to come and join us on the 3rd. Special thanks to Maureen Szostek and everyone at Barnes & Noble for their patience and their help. And extra special thanks to Michael Shermer for coming to Texas to visit everyone. We hope to see you again soon, Michael!



ID Symposium at UT Dallas

by Burl Grey

The symposium looked and felt just like any scientific meeting I've attended over the decades, around the country. I signed up too late for the luncheon but arrived for the start at about 1:30 p.m. It ended at 6 p.m. I estimate about 30 to 40 people milling around in friendly clusters waiting for the first talk.

I believe the primary community of scientists say that the Creationists have lost court battles for years and now they have morphed into Intelligent Design as a 'wedge issue' to subvert the constitutional limit on religion in the public sphere.

Four Ph.Ds spoke: Paul Nelson, Raymond Bohlin, Bruce Gordon and William Dembski. Three of these were good lecturers but Bruce Gordon was, in my opinion, a little flakey and shaky with his attempt to use quantum theory for a metaphysics of human identity. Since quantum theory suggests a reality incomprehensible in ordinary terms, then surely God must work his wonders there.

Paul Nelson waxed eloquent and authoritative with beautiful matching slides about the Cambrian Explosion with quotes from Darwin and Gould about the explanatory "gap" for a gradualist theory. I thought he did an excellent job of putting his God in the 'gaps'.

I don't remember any of them using the word God, because they are at great pains to present their arguments as science.

Next was Raymond Bohlin who was also a very well prepared lecturer. He too was after explanatory 'gaps' in his domain of molecular and cell biology.

Next was Dr. Bruce Gordon, as above, who I thought hopelessly confused and disorganized with his, in my opinion, vacuous meanderings about non-locality and entanglement (real scientific material), but put to the service of supernatural design.

The last speaker was William Dembski who has top academic credentials and spoke well and persuasively with no need of notes or slides.

He said he was scheduled to appear in Dover county Pennsylvania as an expert witness for the school board who is fighting a complaint from the ACLU over a proposed one minute statement for the ninth grade biology class. It says that there are alternative theories and one of them is Intelligent Design and if you are interested, you can go the library and read more about it. He suggested it could go all the way to the supreme court!

Citing Richard Dawkins who spoke of the appearance of design, he said the burden of evolutionists was to show how this

appearance of design comes about. He was also clear that evolution was change over time and said "Nobody would argue with that!" His primary argument uses what Michael Behe's calls an 'irreducible complexity'. It therefore requires a designer because the probability of it happening by chance is effectively zero, hence, blind evolution is a failed explanation for the origin of life.

In the question period I asked him for an example of something ID had contributed to a scientific explanation of life. He said, "Many things..." I interrupted him, saying: "All I want is one!" The audience laughed. He then launched into a long description of some kind of mathematical "design detection algorithm." In looking at his 1999 book *Intelligent Design* I see that chapter 6 is devoted to his idiosyncratic view of information which he calls "the Conservation of Information." It's highly technical, but on page 160 he says: "The connection between design and information theory is therefore straightforward..."



Ide Trotter and Ray Bohlin teamed up at the Texas Freedom Network's conference in November 2003. The Trotter Prize is awarded for "illuminating the connection between science and religion." Ray Bohlin is the Discovery Institute's point man in the Dallas area.

(Photo by John Blanton)

His lecture stressed that he had succeeded in a scientific endeavor of developing a "design detection" formula or algorithm.

It's my opinion that his conflation of information with entropy is a serious error of understanding and I believe it is his Achilles Heel.

For those with advanced mathematical skills, of whom I am *not* one, here is a critical report of his theory of information "Conservation of Information":
http://www.talkreason.org/articles/dembski_LCI.pdf

For others, like myself I offer an in depth analysis of information I have on my website here:
<http://www.burlgrey.com/xtra/infola/infolap3.htm>

Another source for exploring the difficulties with information theory is here:
<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/INFORMATION.html>



Web news

by John Blanton

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

H. B. McLain

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-04-21.htm#mclain>

http://karws.gso.uri.edu/JFK/history/The_deed/Sneed/McLain.html

Motorcycle officer McLain's microphone button was stuck "open" when the shots rang out that killed President Kennedy. That's how come we know there were multiple shooters and that a vast conspiracy was involved in the assassination.

Except, it wasn't McLain's microphone, and the motorcycle involved was three miles away from the shooting, and it wasn't shots that were recorded on the police tape. He explains what went down:

When I got back from Washington, J. C. Bowles, who was the chief dispatcher and who had studied the tapes, called me and asked if I'd heard the tapes. When I told him no, he said, "Can you come by my office when you get off work?" So I went by there and was told to take two tapes into the other room. He set up a cassette recorder and told me, "Play this one; listen to it; then play this other one and listen to it." When I came out, he asked, "Is that your mike that's stuck?" and I replied that it wasn't. "Why?"

I told him, "It's a three-wheeler that's stuck."

You can tell very clearly the difference between the sound of a solo motorcycle that we rode and a three-wheel motorcycle; it's like daylight and dark. The solo engine has kind of a thump to it: CHUKE.. CHUKE.. CHUKE.., while the three-wheeler has more of a thrashing sound.. AAANG.. AAANG.. AAANG! You could hear this all on the tapes, but the people in

Washington didn't listen. They were trying to tell us what it was.

While in Washington, they commenced to ask all kinds of questions: "Well, did you hear Curry say this, or did you hear that?"

'Yeah, I heard it!' I said.

"Well, how can you hear it if your mike's stuck?"

"My mike ain't stuck," I responded. If they'd have let me listen to the tapes before I went up there, I could have told them right quick that it wasn't my motorcycle but that it was a three-wheeler. In fact, that three-wheeler was three miles away at the Trade Mart, thus they didn't hear any shots on the tapes and their theory was not valid.

The noise they heard was the radio popping. Those old radios popped all the time. Sometimes it sounded like a gun going off. But their investigator didn't listen to any of that; he didn't listen to the motors running.

It's not just Americans. I have had foreigners tell me: "There are some people in America who still believe a lone gunman killed Kennedy."

Officer McLain, after 27 years, retired from the police department in 1980.

Amateur video purportedly shows 'huge' Bigfoot

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-04-21.htm#bigfoot>

<http://www.azcentral.com/offbeat/articles/0419rrbigfoot19-ON.html>

He's back, and this time it's not 8mm.

Canadian Press

Apr. 19, 2005 10:31 AM

NORWAY HOUSE, Man. - Is Bigfoot walking the bush around a remote community in northern Manitoba?

Residents have been flocking to Georgina Henry's house to watch two minutes and 49 seconds of video shot by her son, Bobby Clarke, on the banks of the Nelson River shortly after dawn Saturday morning.

"It's pictures of Bigfoot," she said. "It's black and it's big. Oh god, it's huge - seven or eight feet high," Henry

said. "We can see him walking, and then turning to look at him (Clarke)."

Of course he looked back. It's in the script. Calling rewrite!

Consider intelligent design

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-04-21.htm#design>

<http://www.temple-news.com/news/2005/04/19/Opinion/Consider.Intelligent.Design-929945.shtml>

It's an idea that has more legs than cold fusion. Won't you at least give it a listen?

By Bryan Payne

Temple News - Opinion

Issue: 4/19/05

Early in the 20th century, John Scopes was put on trial for teaching Darwin's theory of natural selection in public schools. The main source of controversy in Darwin's theory was that man naturally evolved from a primate rather than being created by God.

Now, in the early 21st century, the controversy surrounding evolution has been stirred up again, this time in the form of a new bill being presented to the Pennsylvania Legislature as they negotiate the budget over the course of the next two months.

The bill, if passed, would make it legal for schools to require a lesson in evolution that includes a theory called intelligent design.

Proponents of intelligent design argue that the workings of the universe are far too intricate to be the result of evolution. They argue that some force must have set everything in motion, and the debate here stems from who or what exactly is this "force." Critics of the theory regard it as being too similar to Christian dogma.

"I don't know what else to call it besides creationism," said Michael Zimmerman, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh when he spoke to *The Seattle Times*. But is that truly the case? Creationism explicitly states that God is in fact the creator of the universe, while intelligent design simply makes a case that something more powerful than chance plays a role in mankind's construction.

The chatter about Intelligent Design has risen to a low rumble in recent months. Under the goading of the Discovery Institute, parents and other local advocates are increasingly pestering

school boards to include discussion of ID in public school science courses.

Former law professor Phillip Johnson has previously outlined the Discovery Institute's plan for advancing ID:

Phase I. Scientific Research, Writing & Publication

Phase II. Publicity & Opinion-making

Phase III. Cultural Confrontation & Renewal

Phase I includes research in paleontology and molecular biology. Apparently it didn't take the DI long to tire of this activity. Besides they didn't seem to be making much headway and their timetable was in danger of slipping. People grow old and die, as we all know.

So they have advanced quickly to Phase II, which includes:

Book Publicity

Opinion-Maker Conferences

Apologetics Seminars

Teacher Training Program

Op-ed Fellow

PBS (or other TV) Co-production

Publicity Materials / Publications

Johnson's books, starting with *Darwin on Trial*, plus books by William Dembski, Michael Behe, Jonathan Wells, and others, have gotten ID out in front of the public and have given ID the minimal legitimacy its fans require. After all, when something's printed in ink on acid-free paper and collated and stitched and trimmed and bound between attractive covers, there must be something to it.

Coming up next: Phase III. This includes a "shift to social sciences and humanities." The rest of us can hardly wait.

The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-04-21.htm#fox>

<http://www.csicop.org/bib/687>

Rob Hardy has reviewed Nancy Rubin Stuart's book about the Fox sisters, who created the spiritualism fad back in the 19th century. Physicist and skeptic Taner Edis posts book reviews of interest on the CSICOP Web site.

Maggie Fox, and her sisters, were good enough at toe snapping (and the equivalent of ventriloquism, making people think the noises were coming from elsewhere)

that they harnessed the snaps to spooky effect. They convinced first their mother and then much of the American public that the raps were simply the manner of telegraph that dead people use to contact those of us left behind here. It seems preposterous that the spirits, with all the resources of The World Beyond, would have to resort to such a system of communication, and indeed, after the Fox sisters got started, they and their imitators were able to show how spirits helped in such useful feats as tipping tables, writing in trances, producing yucky ectoplasm, or many other peculiar manifestations. Stuart's book, the first full biography of Maggie Fox, is an important history of the founding of spiritualism. Her descendants, like John Edward and James Van Praagh, are still making money by contacting the dead, and it is useful to be reminded how the origin of spiritualism, fired by the hopes of bereaved families, was founded upon fraud. (Stuart tries for balance, and maintains, even against the evidence presented here, that the questions of authenticity among spiritualists remain "just beyond our grasp.")

You can read all the reviews at . You can purchase Stuart's book (and earn a commission for the NTS) from Amazon.com using the following link:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0151010137/thenorthtexaske>

Intelligent design can't be dismissed from a scientific perspective

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/editorials/apr05/318700.asp>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-04-21.htm#berlinski>

By DAVID BERLINSKI

If you missed David Berlinski's scintillating performance in the PBS *Firing Line* debate on creation and evolution back in December 1997, here's your chance to catch his wit and charm. In the *Firing Line* debate Berlinski was twice rebuffed when he challenged biologist Kenneth Miller with his "facts," only to have to take back his remarks immediately when confronted with contrary evidence. Wit and charm were what he had going for him then, and they are the main substance of his op-ed piece in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel:

The defense of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution has now fallen into the hands of biologists who believe in suppressing criticism when possible and ignoring it when not.

It is not a strategy calculated to induce confidence in the scientific method.

A paper published recently in the *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* concluded that the events taking place during the Cambrian era could best be understood in terms of an intelligent design - hardly a position unknown in the history of Western science. The paper was, of course, peer-reviewed by three prominent evolutionary biologists.

Wise men attend to the publication of every one of the society's papers, but in this case, the editors were given to understand that they had done a bad thing. Their indecent capitulation followed at once.

Publication of the paper, they confessed, was a mistake. And peer review? The heck with it.

"If scientists do not oppose anti-evolutionism," remarked Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Council for Science Education, "it will reach more people with the mistaken idea that evolution is scientifically weak."

Scott's understanding of "opposition" had nothing to do with reasoned discussion. It had nothing to do with reason at all. Discussing the issue was out of the question.

Her advice to her colleagues was considerably more to the point: "Avoid debates." Everyone had better shut up.

Berlinski sums up what is wrong with Darwin:

Look: Darwin's theory is open at one end since there is no plausible account for the origins of life.

Look: The astonishing and irreducible complexity of various cellular structures has not yet successfully been described, let alone explained.

Look: A great many species enter the fossil record trailing no obvious ancestors and depart for Valhalla leaving no obvious descendents.

Look: Where attempts to replicate Darwinian evolution on the computer have been successful, they have not used classical Darwinian principles. Where they have used such principles, they have not been successful.

Look: Tens of thousands of fruit flies have come and gone in laboratory experiments, and every last one of them has remained a fruit fly to the end, all efforts to see the miracle of speciation unavailing.

Look: The remarkable similarity in the genome of a great many organisms suggests that there is, at bottom, only one living system. But how then to account for the astonishing differences between human beings and their near relatives, differences that remain obvious to anyone who has visited a zoo?

But look again: If the differences between organisms are scientifically more interesting than their genomic similarities, of what use is Darwin's theory since its otherwise mysterious operations take place by genetic variations?

Berlinski's idea is that serious scientists don't really like modern theories of evolution, but keep these thoughts to themselves:

These are hardly trivial questions. Each suggests a dozen others. These are hardly circumstances that do much to support the view that there are "no valid criticisms of Darwin's theory," as so many recent editorials have suggested.

Serious biologists quite understand all this. They rather regard Darwin's theory as an elderly uncle invited to a family dinner. The old boy has no hair, he has no teeth, he is hard of hearing and he often drools. Addressing

even senior members at table as "sonny," he is inordinately eager to tell the same story over and over again.

But he's family. What can you do?

Didn't I tell you about wit and charm?

Lest you think Berlinski is an odd ball, squeaking only to like kind, be advised he has a wider audience. Even my brother-in-law in Milwaukee is a Berlinski fan. We had better watch out.

David Berlinski received his PhD in philosophy from Princeton University and was later a postdoctoral fellow in mathematics and molecular biology at Columbia University. He is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute in Seattle.

You can read up on the *Firing Line* debate at the following URLs:

<http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/p45.htm>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/issues/creationism/firingline/debate.htm>



What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Evolution: Discovery Institute finds a scientist to debate.

The National Press Club in Washington, DC is a good place to hold a press conference. If a group can make its message look like an important story, it can get national coverage. The message of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute is simple: "Intelligent Design is science." That's bull feathers of course, but that's why they have PR people. Science is what scientists do, so they gotta look like scientists. Nothing can make you look more like a scientist than to debate one. Scam artists all use the "debate ploy": perpetual-motion-machine inventors, magnet therapists, UFO conspiracy theorists, all of them. They win just by being on the same platform. So, the Discovery Institute paid for prominent biologist Will Provine, the Charles A. Alexander Professor of Biological Sciences at Cornell, to travel to Washington to debate one of the Discovery Institute's "kept" PhDs, Stephen Meyer, at the National Press Club on Wednesday. It was sparsely attended. Most were earnest, well-scrubbed, clean-cut young believers, who smiled, nodded in agreement and applauded at all the right times. The debate was not widely

advertised. I'm not sure they really wanted a lot of hot-shot reporters asking hard questions. The only reporter was from UPI, which is owned by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church, a spiritual partner of the Discovery Institute. The next day I searched on Google for any coverage of the debate. The only story I could find was in the *Washington Times*, a newspaper owned by – the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Kansas: AAAS turns down an invitation to debate evolution.

Last Friday, the Kansas State Department of Education invited the American Association for the Advancement of Science "to provide expert opinion regarding the mainstream scientific view of the nature of science," at a hearing on evolution. Drawing from the Santorum report language accompanying the No Child Left Behind Act, the invitation says the curriculum "should help students understand the full range of scientific views that exist." Of course. The problem is that there is only one scientific view of the origin of species: Darwin's "natural selection." The hearing will be nothing but elaborately staged theater, with intelligent designers portrayed as scientists. The AAAS CEO, Alan Leshner, quite properly declined, "We see no purpose in debating a matter of faith." Neither does WN. But wait, isn't this the same Alan Leshner who defends the AAAS Dialog on Science, Ethics and Religion? In an editorial in the 11 Feb 05 issue of *Science*, Leshner argued that getting together with religious leaders to discuss the relation of scientific advances to other belief systems is helpful (WN 11 Feb 05). 

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

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