An Interview with Dr. William A. Dembski [0]

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Introduction

A mathematician and philosopher, William A. Dembski is Research Professor in Philosophy at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth. He is also a senior fellow with Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture in Seattle as well as the executive director of the International Society for Complexity, Information, and Design. Previously he was the Carl F. H. Henry Professor of Theology and Science at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, where he founded its Center for Theology and Science. Before that he was Associate Research Professor in the Conceptual Foundations of Science at Baylor University, where he also headed the first intelligent design think-tank at a major research university: The Michael Polanyi Center.

Dr. Dembski has taught at Northwestern University, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Dallas. He has done postdoctoral work in mathematics at MIT, in physics at the University of Chicago, and in computer science at Princeton University. A graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago where he earned a B.A. in psychology, an M.S. in statistics, and a Ph.D. in philosophy, he also received a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Chicago in 1988 and a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1996. He has held National Science Foundation graduate and postdoctoral fellowships.

Dr. Dembski has published articles in mathematics, philosophy, and theology journals and is the author/editor of more than ten books. In The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance Through Small Probabilities (Cambridge University Press, 1998), he examines the design argument in a post-Darwinian context and analyzes the connections linking chance, probability, and intelligent causation. The sequel to The Design Inference appeared with Rowman & Littlefield in 2002 and critiques Darwinian and other naturalistic accounts of evolution. It is titled No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence. Dr. Dembski has edited several influential anthologies, including Uncommon Dissent: Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing (ISI, 2004) and Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA (Cambridge University Press, 2004, co-edited with Michael Ruse). His newest book is a festschrift volume in honor of Phillip Johnson. It is titled Darwin's Nemesis: Phillip Johnson and

the Intelligent Design Movement.

As interest in intelligent design has grown in the wider culture, Dr. Dembski has assumed the role of public intellectual. In addition to lecturing around the world at colleges and universities, he is frequently interviewed on the radio and television. His work has been cited in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, including three front page stories in the New York Times as well as the August 15, 2005 Time magazine cover story on intelligent design. He has appeared on the BBC, NPR (Diane Rehm, etc.), PBS (Inside the Law with Jack Ford; Uncommon Knowledge with Peter Robinson), CSPAN2, CNN, Fox News, ABC Nightline, and the Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

Interview
[CA=the Interviewer, Ciencia Alternativa; WD=William Dembski]

CA: Dr. Dembski, ID has come a very long way since its inception; and ID proponents are making inroads in a vast array of scientific disciplines such as astronomy, biology, and chemistry. How has your own work in mathematics (namely, *The Design Inference* and *No Free Lunch*) helped or influenced the development of novel ways of doing science?

WD: It's too early to tell what the impact of my ideas is on science. To be sure, there has been much talk about my work and many scientists are intrigued (though more are upset and want to destroy it), but so far only a few scientists see how to take these ideas and run with them. There's a reason for this slow start. My work in The Design Inference was essentially a work on the philosophical foundations of probability theory, trying to understand how to interpret probabilities in certain contexts. This led naturally to some ideas about information and the type of information used in drawing design inferences. My book No Free Lunch was a semi-popular overview of where I saw the ID movement headed on the topic of information. The hard work of developing these ideas into a rigorous information-theoretic formalism for doing science really began only in 2005 with some unpublished papers on the mathematical foundations of intelligent design that appeared on my website (www.designinference.com). With the formation of Baylor's Evolutionary Informatics Lab just this month and work by me and my colleague Robert Marks on the conservation of information (several papers of which are available at www.evolutionaryinformatics.org), I think ID is finally in a position to challenge certain fundamental assumptions in the natural sciences about the nature and origin of information. This, I believe, will have a large impact on science.

CA: Your critics (such as Wein, Perakh, Shallit, Elsberry, Wolpert and others) seem unsatisfied with your work. They charge your work as being somewhat esoteric and lacking intellectual rigor. What do you say to that charge?

WD: Most of these critics are responding to my book No Free Lunch. As I explained in the preface of that book, the aim of this book was to provide enough technical details so that experts could fill in details, but enough exposition so that the general reader could grasp the essence of my project. The book seems to have succeeded with the general reader and with some experts, though mainly with those who were already well-disposed toward ID. In any case, it became clear after that publication of that book that I would need to fill in the mathematical details myself, something I have been doing right along (see my articles described under "mathematical foundations of intelligent design" at www.designinfernece.com) and which has now been taken up in earnest in a collaboration with my friend and colleague Robert Marks at Baylor University's Evolutionary Informatics Lab

(www.evolutionaryinformatics.org (http://www.evolutionaryinformatics.org/)).

CA: Are you evading the tough questions?

WD: Of course not. But tough questions take time to answer, and I have been patiently answering them. I find it interesting now that I have started answering the critics' questions with full mathematical rigor (see http://web.ecs.baylor.edu/faculty/marks/eil/Publications.html   (http://web.ecs.baylor.edu/faculty/marks/eil/Publications.html)   ) that they are strangely silent. Jeff Shallit, for instance, when I informed him of some work of mine on the conservation of information told me that he refuse to address it because I had not adequately addressed his previous objections to my work, though the work on conservation of information about which I was informing him was precisely in response to his concerns. Likewise, I've interacted with Wolpert. Once I started filling in the mathematical details of my work, however, he fell silent. Perhaps the most striking instance of silence is that of Thomas Schneider, whose article on the evolution of biological information in Nucleic Acids Research (2000) claims to refute my colleague Michael Behe. When Robert Marks and I recently showed that his evolutionary program was equivalent to a neural network and that it works worse than pure chance (http://web.ecs.baylor.edu/faculty/marks/T/ev2.pdf (http://web.ecs.baylor.edu/faculty/marks/T/ev2.pdf)), he too fell silent though in the past he would reply in a day's time on his own website to any challenge from me. I have found that Darwinists make a habit of staying quiet about problems with their theory and ignore the best criticisms of it.

CA: Are there any major universities supporting the work of ID proponents? If not, why not?

WD: I wouldn't say that universities as such support ID. They tolerate it if the faculty member doing ID research has tenure. And if they don't have tenure, the university makes sure that they don't get tenure (the tenure denial of Guillermo Gonzalez at Iowa State University is latest instance). Why this opposition? Darwinists have been very successful at demonizing anyone who dissents from their materialistic view of evolution. They have essentially established a Stalinist regime over the western academy.

CA: I know about the Biologic Institute and the work of Dr. Minnich. Are there any other laboratories currently doing ID work?

WD: Baylor's Evolutionary Informatics Lab: www.evolutionaryinformatics.org. I understand another ID lab at Baylor is on the way.

CA: Is your (still incomplete) monograph, Mathematical Foundations of Intelligent Design, supposed to be a more complete or rigorous explanation for inferring design?

WD: For now, this work will be published as separate articles in collaboration with Robert Marks. I expect that eventually we will be co-authoring a monograph on this topic together, though we may not give it that title given the climate of hostility against ID. The emphasis in this work shifts from detecting or inferring design to the need for information in search. These are related problems since information that enables successful search can trigger a design inference.

CA: Now that we have methods of design detection (i.e. The Explanatory Filter and Behe's Irreducible Complexity), is there any work being done on the designer's modus operandi, other than the conjunct of

evolutionary theories and front loading? I am thinking of something in the lines of Von Neumann terms, such as self replicating automata or the increase of specificity atom at a time. Is this an irrelevant question? Why?

WD: The implementation of design into living systems, especially at the origin of life, is a fascinating question but I'm not sure that science is in a position right now to answer it. If life is indeed designed, then it represents a technology far more sophisticated than anything humans have devised. It may take some time before our technology is at the place where we can determine the designer's modus operandi. ID research, however, does not need to be limited to that question. Much of the focus these days is on the limits of evolution given certain types of informational resources. This is an inherently interesting question and one that does not prejudge which theory is likely to emerge on top, ID or Darwinian evolution.

CA: Do you feel that we are on the verge of proposing a neo-saltation theory on the smorgasbord of ideas?

WD: I don't think the evidence supports universal common descent, but there are design theorists such as Michael Behe who think that it does. A saltational theory of life's diversification is therefore a design-theoretic option, but it is not the only option, and I don't expect to see any one position gain ascendancy within the ID movement any time soon.

CA: Amidst all the animosity and criticisms written about your work, what is your motivation for continuing this ambitious research program?

WD: The work itself is immensely satisfying and intellectually stimulating. Moreover, I see those who seek to shut it down as intolerant dogmatists who encapsulate a tyranny that I despise. So I get to see myself as both a scientific researcher and as a freedom fighter—a rare combination.

CA: You've done a lot of work on ID already. Is there something else in the works? Maybe other theoretical models for inferring design?

WD: I see evolutionary informatics as the scientific core of ID and expect I'll be working in this field for the next several years. In addition to this work with the engineering and mathematical communities, I retain my interests in philosophy and theology and have various books in the works in this area. My first doctorate was in mathematics, and what mathematics has given me is a desire to solve interesting problems, whatever they might be and wherever I might find them. One of the things that convinces me that ID is on to something is that I find one interesting research problem leading to another, and that I have more interesting problems to resolve than I have years to spend working on them. Despite all the opposition I face, especially ostracism from the scientific mainstream, which can be painful, I would not change places with anyone.