

MY IMPRESSIONS FROM READING PORTIONS OF

William A. Dembski's

"Intelligent Design; The Bridge Between Science & Theology"

(InterVarsityPress, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1999)

After reading Schroeder I wanted to read Pinker, whom he greatly disliked for good reason it turns out, and I wanted to read more about "Intelligent Design" which he praises and discusses reverently.

I bought the Pinker book first. Pinker does not like "Intelligent Design." Then I read this book by Dembski, I read pieces in it, and I didn't like the feel of it, nor the feel of its arguments. I made fun of Schroeder's preachy style in my review. This book felt even more like a sermon packed in mild scientific jargon than Schroeder's did.

After reading the pieces explaining how Intelligent Design was different from Creationism, and how to answer charges that it was the same, I felt that Pinker was on to something when he said on his page 133 that:

Any inroads of the religious right into mainstream intellectual life will be limited by their opposition to the theory of

evolution itself. Whether it is known as creationism or by the euphemism Intelligent Design, a denial of the theory of natural selection will founder under the weight of the mass of evidence that the theory is correct. How much additional damage the denial will do to science education and biomedical research before it sinks is unknown.

Pinker also criticizes the radical left and its cadre of radical scientists, but the bulk of his ire is on the right which seems to be effective in influencing politicians into interfering with science and education. He does praise my wife's first cousin, however, Senator Orrin Hatch, for breaking ranks with the opponents of stem-cell research after learning more of the science concerned and meditating on his Mormon faith. He came to see that cell in a freezer was simply not the same thing as a child in a womb.

Pinker, on his page 130, said something that I sensed to be quite true when reading both Schroeder and Dembski:

But the right-wing opposition to the sciences of human nature can no longer be associated only with Bible-thumpers and televangelists. Today evolution is being challenged by some of the most cerebral theorists in the formerly secular neoconservative movement. They are embracing a hypothesis called Intelligent Design, originated by the biochemist Michael Behe. [Behe wrote the foreword to Dembski's book.] The molecular machinery of cells cannot function in a simpler form, Behe argues, and therefore it could not have evolved piecemeal by natural selection. Instead it must have been conceived as a working invention by an intelligent designer. The designer could, in theory, have been an advanced alien from outer space, but everyone knows that the subtext of the theory is that it must have been God.

That was my impression in a nutshell reading parts of Dembski's book. Pinker characterizes this movement correctly, just as Dembski, as Schroeder did, characterizes Pinker correctly. The disagreement lies in the interpretation of the science at hand. Pinker continues by saying that Behe (thus Dembski) have the science wrong. But he also acknowledges the seriousness of the movement and mentions some of its well-known devotees.

In a cruel move, Pinker asks if these devotees really believe that evolution is false, or is they simply "think it is important for other people to believe it is false." He pursues this idea for several pages, and we will recommend them to you and move on to Dembski.

Having read what Pinker thought of Dembski subject, as presented by the author of his Foreword, Michael Behe, it seems only right to see what Dembski says of Pinker's neuroscience-based ideas (only the ideas, he never mentions Pinker) on his pages 215 through 218 (and beyond) where he discusses neurophysiology in its naturalistic context:

Because cognitive scientists have yet to effect a full reduction of intelligent agency to natural causes, they speak of intelligent agency as *supervening* on natural causes. Supervenience is a hierarchical relationship between higher order processes (in the case intelligent agency) and lower order processes (in this case natural causes). What supervenience says is that the relationship between the higher and lower order processes is a one-way street, with the lower determining the higher. To say, for instance, that intelligent agency supervenes on neurophysiology is to say that once all the facts about neurophysiology are in place, all the facts about intelligent agency are determined as well. It simply asserts that the lower level determines the higher level—how it does it, we don't know.

Dembski is accusing the neuroscience-explains-all camp of scientism, as discussed in Raymo's book, in other words. He says we are being asked to wait until neuroscience has completed its work, and then we will see they were right all along as claimed. Dembski observes on this approach (still page 215, with a little from 216):

Neuroscience, for instance, is nowhere near achieving its ambitions, and that despite its strident rhetoric. Hardcore neuroscientist refer disparagingly to the ordinary psychology of beliefs, desires and emotions as "folk psychology." The implication is that just as "folk medicine" had to give way to "real medicine," so "folk psychology" will have to give way to a revamped psychology that is grounded in neuroscience. In place of talking cures that address our beliefs, desires and emotions, tomorrow's healers of the soul will manipulate brain states directly and ignore such outdated categories as beliefs, desires and emotions.

At least so the story goes. Actual neuroscience research has yet to keep pace with its vaulting ambition. That should hardly surprise us. The neurophysiology of our brains is incredibly plastic and has proven notoriously difficult to correlate with intentional states. For instance, Louis Pasteur, despite suffering a cerebral accident, continued to enjoy a flourishing scientific career. When his brain was examined after he died, it was discovered that half the brain had completely atrophied. How does one explain a flourishing intellectual life despite a severely damaged brain if mind and brain coincide?

Dembski uses one more example of this type to make his point about the mind being greater than the brain, just as Pinker used similar examples to make the opposite point. On page 218 I had to agree with Dembski when he criticizes the promise of the computer

analysts working on cognitive science problems that their breakthrough is just around the corner. He calls this promissory note in which one should trust "promissory materialism," which has a nice ring to it. I think he is talking about scientism as Raymo described it: science driven by a hope of an outcome, an ideology, even, rather than facts obtained from serious critical observation and experimental experience.

But Dembski left me quite cold when he proved the existence of an afterlife for the soul and the body from the Bible's proof of Jesus' resurrection on pages 42 and 43. I have to agree with his assertion on page 103 that naturalism is an ideology. That in its scientific form it is most virulent and must be combated, however, especially since he just defended the Bible and God's existence on the same page, set off a big alarm in me.

It is my impression that this is the attitude that fueled the control of science by terror in the Middle Ages. It is the attitude that controls science by law and funding curtailments in the present day. It is not good. Naturalism is an ideology, true, but it is a necessary foundation for scientific inquiry or we might as well try to answer every question of every type by consulting holy writ.

Dembski takes my idea of science requiring naturalism as a foundation to task on his page 224 as a part of a section where he is claiming that intelligent design is scientific because it is provable from applying a rigorous "complexity-specification criterion." I think Pinker had it right when he suggested that design by an intelligent agent is invoked wherever there is great complexity and uncertainty. I also think Dembski is right in criticizing the premature claims of the neurophysiologists to having proved naturalism, or the reduction of all intelligent agency to natural causes as Dembski explains on page 221:

As we've seen, neurophysiology hasn't a clue about how to reduce intelligent agency to natural causes (hence its continued retreat to concepts like supervenience, emergence and hierarchy—concepts which merely cloak ignorance). We's also seen that no actual computational systems show any sign of reducing intelligent agency to computation. The argument that we are computational systems because the totality of our possible behavioral outputs and possible sensory inputs is finite holds only if we presuppose that we are nothing more than the sum of those behavioral and sensory inputs.

Dembski takes these scientific stretches to task, rightly, but for all the wrong reasons. Instead he asserts and inserts his own scientisms, based on this formerly intuitive (page 222) insight, now made scientific by the application of the complexity-specification criterion (page 223). But, to me it is obvious that this criterion was constructed to bolster an ideology, plain and simple.

On page 218 Dembski opposes hard-core artificial intelligence enthusiasts who hope to show that . . . "humans are simply disguised computers" . . . "can be represented computationally. . ." and therefore humans are. . ."functionally equivalent to computers"

He does use the modifiers "hard-core" before artificial intelligence, but may be reflecting an irrelevant minority opinion. We saw, however, that the *Encyclopedia of Religion* says we are not there yet, but cannot rule out some future time when a true intelligent construct is made that will achieve sentience, self awareness. However, Pinker is a skeptic on this issue, to his credit he cites several artificial-intelligence achievements but then observes (Pinker's page 34):

None of this is to say that the brain works like a digital computer, that artificial intelligence will ever duplicate the human mind, or that computers are conscious in the sense of having first-person subjective experience. But it does suggest that reasoning, intelligence, imagination and creativity are forms of information processing, a well-understood physical process.

Seems reasonable to me.

All in all, I am not convinced of anything much by either Pinker or Dembski where ultimate reality is concerned. But if Pinker ever formed a political party to implement his vision of an ethical and open society, I'd at least go vote for him or his like-minded candidate.