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The New Alchemist: an interview with William Dembski

by *Tabula Rasa*

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[Note for the humor-impaired: this is a *satire* (“trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit...folly” – <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=satire>)]

I met with William (“Doc”) Dembski, a leading scientific proponent of Intelligent Design Creationism (IDC) one week after the Supreme Court’s stunning 6-3 decision to mandate the teaching of IDC alongside the Theory of Evolution in all elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and night and extension divisions, as well as all correspondence courses.



Our conversation took place in Dembski’s office, or – as he refers to it – his “laBORatory,” amid a maze of tubing, alembics, retorts, and other apparatus that were unfamiliar to me.

My first question related to the recent Supreme Court decision. “We had no doubt as to the outcome,” he mused, with obvious satisfaction, “given that we had God on our side.” When I noted that having four arch-conservative justices appointed to the

Court in the past several years may have contributed, he smiled. “That, of course, was part of God’s plan. It was determined that we would push the forces of atheism and agnosticism aside, and assure that the true Designer of the Universe is acknowledged.”

I was somewhat surprised at what appeared to be an admission that IDC was, in fact, committed to a theistic view of the Universe: hadn’t he, and other IDC proponents, repeatedly asserted that they had no commitment to any particular designer? “Naturally, we had to say that,” he replied, “otherwise we’d never have been able to overcome the bias of naturalism that pervades the sciences. But as Christians we know that naturalism is false¹, and since naturalism is the fundamental tenet of non-theistic religions – secular humanism, atheism, agnosticism² – we felt justified in misrepresenting our position.”

This confession was so startling that I decided to change the subject, to give myself a moment to recover. I noticed a large, leatherbound edition of *Don*

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Quixote standing on his desk, between two Bibles, and asked him about it. He reached out and stroked the spine. “Don Quixote is one of my heroes,” he explained. “He was – in Cervantes’ words – ‘willing to march into Hell for a Heavenly cause.’³ I’ve done the same.” When I pointed out that Don Quixote was a madman, driven by delusions and misperceptions to acts of self-destructive folly, he smiled again. “Yes, that’s what the secular humanists who dominate literary criticism would have you believe. But there’s a fine line between madness and divine inspiration, and when a secularist wants to discredit a true believer, it’s convenient to attribute his passion to pathological obsession.”

This subject was no less disturbing to me, so once again I redirected my questioning. What, I asked, was on his agenda now: what new projects, what new goals, did he have?

He seemed even more delighted with this topic than with the IDC victory. “I’m so glad you asked me about this,” he beamed, “I’ve got several theories under construction and development, and I can show you some of my preliminary results.”

He led me deeper into the dim recesses of his office – which, I had to admit, was reminiscent of a laboratory, although not one I’d seen outside a history of science textbook. “I’ve modeled my research facilities on those of Athanasius Kircher⁴,” he announced with obvious pride. I pointed at a vessel on a nearby table, which contained what appeared to be a small figurine, and asked about that.

“Yes, that Philosopher’s Egg⁵ contains a homunculus⁶. I have been contemplating ways of dissecting it without causing it harm, to discover the homunculus within, and the homunculus within that, et cetera.” I must have appeared puzzled, because he elaborated. “We believe that Mendelian genetics is a fundamentally flawed model for the transmission of features from ancestor to progeny. The homunculus theory is much more plausible, in that it doesn’t require the belief in a ridiculously complex series of processes that nobody has actually observed.”

While attempting to absorb this, I pointed to a table on which lay several containers with familiar-looking contents, and one that appeared empty, and asked him to describe them.

“Ah, those Matresses⁷ contain the four Elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. We have always had concerns about the teaching of the atomic theory of matter to the exclusion of all others. The atomic theory requires us to believe in the existence of a vast number of invisible particles, and it is far too complex to be feasible. I have been formulating theories with which I will demonstrate the viability of some

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alternatives – for example, by combining Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, one can create any natural element.”

He indicated two containers, one of which was half-filled with brown sludge, and one which contained what appeared to be ashes. “Yes, those are two early theories: by combining Earth and Water, one obtains Mud, which is immensely useful in the pursuit of scholarly argument. And by combining Earth and Fire, one obtains what I refer to as ‘scorched earth,’ which I have also found useful in the pursuit of my campaigns.”

I asked about the other obvious combinations – for example, Earth and Air, and Fire and Water. He frowned. “I have not yet had much success with these combinations,” he admitted, “but some progress has been made recently.” He seemed reluctant to pursue this further, and after a brief pause, he moved on.

“Now this theory,” he continued, moving to the next table, “will show that the theory of combustion of Priestley and others is incorrect. That vial contains pure Phlogiston, which was distilled by means of that pelican⁸.” He indicated a test tube containing a greenish, viscous fluid, from which wafted an odor that was vaguely reminiscent of gasoline. “If I were to pour some of it onto – say – this copy of *The Panda’s Thumb*, the book should immediately ignite. Unfortunately, as delightful as this might be, I have yet to obtain combustion without supplying some impetus” – he removed a Bic lighter from his pocket.

By now, I was somewhat stupefied by Dembski’s presentation, but I trudged gamely on. I pointed to the next table, on which there appeared to be the remnants of a Tuscan dinner.

“That’s a theory designed to demonstrate that Divine agency can, alone, bring life to senseless matter. That plate of vermicelli will eventually be animated, and begin crawling. See!” he shouted, “it’s happening as we speak.!”

I asked him about the small black specks that I could now, on closer examination, see swarming under a few strands. “Are those *ants*?”

“Yes, and if you can think of a more obvious example of the intervention of Divine agency that that, I’d like to hear about it,” he huffed. “Those ants were clearly sent to fulfil my purpose – that is, God’s purpose – in animating the pasta.”

I refrained from observing that the kind of foodstuff was irrelevant, or that “animation” generally implied autonomous motion, because he was clearly on a roll. We moved to a table over which hung a portrait of a bearded and mustachioed gentleman in a heroic pose.

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“Now this theory is dedicated to Saint Michael of Lehigh.” He gazed reverently at the portrait, touching four points on his chest in the sign of the cross before proceeding. “It is a proof that Irreducible Complexity exists and is a valid criterion for inferring design. Of course,” he added in a conspirational tone, “you really need a bit more than small probabilities, so Saint Michael’s formulation is neither totally correct nor wrong⁹. But at any rate, here I’ve removed the legs from a mouse, and the mouse is clearly not functioning as originally intended¹⁰. QED.”

Since the petri dish before me appeared to contain not a mouse, but a garter snake, I was somewhat confused, but Dembski moved on before I could raise an objection. He stopped before a huge expanse of slate, covered almost entirely with mathematical notation in miniscule figures.

“This is my proof of the fourth law of thermodynamics,” he announced with considerable pride. When I pointed out that there was, in fact, no fourth law of thermodynamics, he bristled. “There was no fourth law of thermodynamics: I postulated it myself, and here is the proof.”

On closer inspection, the equations covering the blackboard all appeared to be of the form “ $X = X$ ”, where a bewildering variety of complex expressions replaced ‘X’ in each case. Having some familiarity with both mathematical notation and logic, I asked him whether these were not all tautologies.

“Are you a mathematician?” he thundered. Well, no, I replied, but... “Then you have no business critiquing my formulation. I would never dream of challenging an expert in a field outside my own, and I resent your presumption in challenging me within mine.”

I refrained from observing that he has, in fact, made strong assertions in the fields of biology, statistical physics, and thermodynamics, which didn’t seem to me to be within the purview of his specialty – he has, after all, been called the Newton of Information Theory¹¹ – because he didn’t seem to be in any mood for contradiction. I speculated briefly as to whether he *ever* found himself in such a mood, and decided that such speculation was pointless.

“Among other things,” he continued grumpily, “I have proven beyond question that any event with exceedingly small probability has an exceedingly small probability of occurring, and that any problem that exceeds a certain complexity bound is highly complex.¹²” These still sounded to me like tautologies, but by now I’d been cowed by his assertiveness.

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We had reached the final table in his laboratory. On it stood a single object, a brass lamp reminiscent of the genie's lamp in traditional depictions of the Aladdin story. "This is my magic lamp," he announced without any apparent irony. "I have only to rub it, and anyone who disagrees with me vanishes." He reached toward it as I opened my mouth.

"I..." and – poof – I ceased to exist.

¹ Dembski, Intro to Mere Creation

² John Calvert, WRTI interview

³ This is a line, not from Cervantes, but from the Broadway musical "Man of La Mancha"

⁴ *Mundus Subterraneus...* Amsterdam, 1665. Tomus II., page 260, from <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/kircher.html>

⁵ Philosopher's Egg: a special type of retort in which the neck of the flask went straight up. The forerunner of the modern Florence flask. cf. <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Labyrinth/7091/alchemy/lab.html>

⁶ The term homunculus was later used in the discussion of conception and birth. In 1694, Nicolaas Hartsoeker discovered "animalcules" in the sperm of humans and other animals. Some claimed that the sperm was in fact a "little man" (homunculus) that was placed inside a woman for growth into a child; these later became known as the spermists. This is not as silly as it sounds today, and neatly explained many of the mysteries of conception (for instance, why it takes two). However it was later pointed out that if the sperm was a homunculus, identical in all but size to an adult, then the homunculus must have sperm of its own. This led to a *reductio ad absurdum*, with a chain of homunculi "all the way down".

⁷ Matrass: a simple flask. See Philosopher's Egg.; cf. <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Labyrinth/7091/alchemy/lab.html>

⁸ Pelican: a special distilling flask with two necks for continuous distillation. cf. <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Labyrinth/7091/alchemy/lab.html>

⁹ Find and attribute quote

¹⁰ Find and attribute quote

¹¹ Find and attribute quote

¹² Find and attribute quote