Dembski intends to “untease that tangled web of philosophy and science which constitutes cognitive science.” Although he fails to accomplish this task to my satisfaction, he makes some very good points that are worth considering. Most importantly, he presents an excellent view of the humanist position and the consequent negative implications for human dignity.

Dembski goes to great lengths to point out the (to him) unacceptable implications of a finite, materialistic view of humanity. If we accept that “[t]he humanist wants to believe that humans possess a certain something which computers do not”, then we do see, as Dembski suggests, humanists standing on an eroding ledge. If man is finite, then it is easy to imagine an encoding of man at some level of complexity and fidelity that will subsume humanity. This strikes me as being correct and one of the stronger points Dembski makes.

However, I see two problems with Dembski’s argument. First, in order to make this work with his essay, he would need to establish that man is not merely finite. This argument would have to be made on the merits of independent points and not on the undesirable consequences of the finite view of man. Second, he is perhaps unfairly grouping humanists into a single camp which he drives to the edge of the cliff. Instead, it is entirely conceivable that many humanists view man as the current pinnacle of evolution but that when we are replaced, there will be no shed tears. And this is just one example of alternative positions that would undercut his argument from the finiteness of man.

I am even more concerned about repercussions of his argument upon his own positions. By placing a significant portion of his argument on the slow or arguably non-existent progress of Cognitive Science, his own position is subject to the same potential erosion. Granted, if he is correct in each of his positions, his ledge will hold; but personally, I am not willing to stake my faith on the correctness of my thoughts and positions. Although Dembski doesn't explicitly take such a drastic step, I think the stance
is implied by his arguments. Basically, all of his arguments about human dignity and its meaninglessness if it turns out that Cognitive Science ever succeeds, fall into the same basket and suffer the same problems.

Finally, his “parable of the cube” provides some interesting points for further thought. The simplicity of the example helps cut away much of the confusion and diversion that can accompany treatments of these issues. However again, I think he fails to use the tool correctly or establish his points sufficiently. Ultimately, he creates five classes of responses to the cube and argues that, by comparison to the interplay between God and man, only one position makes sense. Unfortunately, his selected position – that the cube is guided by an intelligence apart from the viewer – suffers a contradiction with the discounted position – that the viewer controls the the cube with a joystick – when the viewer in question becomes God.

In the end, I do not think Dembski managed to untangle much. If anything, I think he is more tightly bound in an untenable position than he was at the start. The success of Cognitive Science will remain for the time being an empirical question, the answer for which we will have to wait. But in the mean time, it is perfectly reasonable for philosophical inquiry from all sides to project and predict what the path ahead will holds in store for us.