

# *The Demise of Bill*

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On a hill overlooking an automobile factory, lived Bill, a retired geneticist, and a retired biochemist (nobody knew his name). Every morning, over a cup of coffee, and every afternoon, over a beer, they would discuss many issues and philosophical points. During their morning conversations, they would watch employees entering the automobile factory below to begin their work day. Some would be dressed in work clothes and carrying a lunch pail, while others, dressed in suits, would be carrying briefcases. Every afternoon, as they drank their beer, they would see fully built automobiles being driven out of the other side of the factory.

Having spent a life in pursuit of higher learning, both were wholly unfamiliar with how cars worked, and they decided that they would like to learn about the functioning of cars. Having different scientific

backgrounds they each took a very different approach. Bill, not being inclined towards hard work (like most geneticists), immediately came up with a scheme that he thought would lead him to an understanding of cars. The next morning he went down the hill and tied the hands of one of the workers in the factory. He then went back up the hill and sat down to a cup of coffee. As he was just starting to sip his cup of coffee, he heard some banging noises and went out to the garage to see what was going on. When he looked in the garage he found that the biochemist had gotten one of the cars from the factory and was already covered with grease and oil as he was doing something under the hood. When Bill asked the biochemist what he was doing, he replied, "I'm taking the car apart to see how it works." The geneticist laughed out loud and then sat down to enjoy his cup of coffee while he made fun of the biochemist. Bill spent the entire day drinking coffee and laughing at the biochemist as he struggled and sweated under the hood of the car. Bill kept telling him that he was wasting his time and that he had a much easier scheme for learning more about the functioning of cars.

Towards the end of the day, as the exhausted biochemist was washing up, the geneticist pointed to the factory below. Cars were rolling out of the factory, and each one lacked a particular circular device (the steering wheel). Moreover, each of the cars failed to make the first turn in the road as they left the factory, and all the cars were piling up on the lawn. "Hah!"

exclaimed the geneticist. "The worker whose hands I tied up today is responsible for installing the circular device, and the circular device is responsible for steering the car." The geneticist then asked the biochemist what he had learned that day. The biochemist said that he had been focusing on a small white object (the spark plug) and that he did not yet know what it did. The geneticist hooted with laughter.

The next day, the geneticist, emboldened by his success, went back down the hill and tied the hands of another worker. He then went back up the hill, got a cup of coffee, and sat down to another day of making fun of the biochemist. The biochemist again spent the day working in the grease and oil, while the geneticist sat around, philosophized, and boasted about the cleverness of his scheme. At the end of the day Bill asked the biochemist what he had learned, and he replied: "I think that a component of the white object is made of an electrically conductive material, and it is surrounded by an insulator." The geneticist just chuckled. They then turned to look down the hill and noticed that there were no cars coming out of the factory. Bill seemed puzzled.

The next day the geneticist, unfazed by the puzzling result of the day before, went down the hill and tied that hands of another worker. He then went back up the hill to get a cup of coffee. As he sat down to his coffee, he heard an explosion in the garage. He ran out to see what had happened, and he found the

biochemist picking himself up off the ground, his face black and most of his hair burned away. When Bill asked in amazement what had happened, the biochemist simply replied, " I have found that the liquid in the tank of the car is fairly explosive." Later that day, when they looked down at the factory to see the effect of Bill's experiment, they observed that all the cars that came out of the factory appeared to be completely normal in their function. Bill decided that the worker whose hands he had tied did nothing important for the factory.

This continued for many days. The geneticist gloated over his every discovery. For instance, at the end of one day the cars that rolled out of the factory were missing the front and rear windows, but not the side windows. Bill told the biochemist, " The worker whose hands I tied today is responsible for installing the front and back windows, and this process is independent of installing the side windows." One evening, as they were drinking some beer and arguing, the biochemist said to Bill, "Now that you have learned so much, tell me how the car works." Bill seemed puzzled by the question, but after thinking awhile he said that he had noticed that whenever the cars don't have the round things (the tires) they are completely unable to go anywhere. He therefore concluded that these round things were actually responsible for moving the car. The biochemist had another sip of his beer and noticed how beautiful the sunset can be after a good day of hard work.

Meanwhile, the biochemist, after many months of hard work, thought that he was beginning to define some pathways. In one pathway, he found that the explosive liquid in the tank moved through a small pipe to a device that turned it into a vapor, and that the vapor was sucked into some cylindrical chambers. In another pathway, an electrical current flowed from a battery to the white devices he had studied earlier, and then formed a spark that ignited the explosive vapor, thus forcing the pistons out. The biochemist had also gone down the hill and taken the time to look at the cars that failed to leave the factory when Bill had tied the hands of some of the workers. He found that they were lacking carburetors, spark plugs, drive shafts, gasoline, etc. By studying these cars, he was able to confirm some of the theories that he had developed regarding the functions of the car's components.

After awhile, the geneticist decided that he now knew enough about cars, and that he wanted to get one so that he could go surfing and to movies while he waited for the results of his experiments. He was running out of workers hands to tie, so he was doing more and more elaborate experiments in which he tied several workers' hands, and in different combinations. In any case, he decided to get a Volkswagen Camper Van because he could fit his surfboard into it. The day he got his van, he stopped by the garage to see what nonsense the biochemist was up to. The biochemist was sitting in the car pumping the clutch, and each time he did a stream of

liquid shot out from underneath the car. He told Bill that he thought the liquid in the tube leading from the clutch pedal to the clutch played a critical role in disengaging the gears from the drive shaft. Bill laughed and then drove off to spend the day at the Three Stooges Film Festival that was showing at a nearby theater.

This went on for several weeks. One day Bill spent the afternoon trying to make himself weigh only 10 pounds by tying various numbers of helium balloons to his body. The day had not gone well °© a wind had come up and bill had been dragged over jagged rocks and through some thorny brush. He was in a fair amount of pain and wanted to get home quickly, but when he got in his van and turned the key nothing happened. He wasn't sure what was wrong, and he wondered whether or not his car might need new wheels. He tried the key several more times and then got out and started to walk. Pretty soon it started to rain. He tried to hitchhike, but nobody seemed to want to pick him up; he did not make it home until very late that night. When he got home, the biochemist, who was drinking beer and reading James Joyce's Ulysses, asked him where he had been, and Bill told him what had happened. Bill confessed that he did not know what to do, but the biochemist said that he might be able to help. The next day they drove back to Bill's stalled van in the biochemist's car °© a 1964 Valiant with a V8 engine and push-button transmission. The biochemist, not being afraid of getting his hands dirty or doing a little work, put on

his coveralls and looked under the hood of Bill's van. He rapidly determined that one of the battery cables no longer made a good connection, and he had the car running in no time at all. As Bill drove away, he just shook his head.

Bill's car kept breaking down, and every time the biochemist had to go out and fix it. He tried to teach Bill how cars work, but Bill didn't seem to understand and was always more interested in his hand-tying experiments. Finally, this all came to an end when the geneticist crashed his car into a tree. He had been driving along just fine when all of a sudden a fruit fly crawled out of his hair and into his eye causing him to swerve off the road. Unfortunately, he was not wearing his seat belt because when he had tied the hands of the worker that installed them, the cars that came out of the factory seemed to function fine, so Bill had concluded that seat belts were vestigial and not important to the function of the car. The doctors said that Bill suffered substantial brain damage, but none of his colleagues ever noticed any difference in his behavior.