

REVIEW

A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genius of Nature

by Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt

Downers Grove (IL): InterVarsity Press, 2006. 257 pages

reviewed by **John M Lynch**

In a document written in 1998, the Discovery Institute articulated its notorious “Wedge Strategy,” a plan to defeat “scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural and political legacies” and “replace materialistic explanations with the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God.” This change would come about through advocacy of “design theory,” initially within the natural sciences, before conquering the social sciences and humanities. Within twenty years, the concept of intelligent design (ID) would “permeate our religious, cultural, moral and political life” and the cultural renewal would be complete. (The “Wedge” document is freely available on-line, for example at <http://lynch.faculty.asu.edu/pub/wedge.pdf>). Having seen design on the earth (see the writings of Michael Behe and Stephen Meyer) and in the heavens (see the writings of Guillermo Gonzalez), the ID movement has recently found other arguments for design, and this discovery is outlined in the book under review.

When a book begins with a wild parody of modern life, it becomes hard to take what follows seriously. Yet Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt—both senior fellows of the Discovery Institute—expect us to do so and accept their subsequent argument as being intellectually rigorous and factually bound. Their prologue (pages 11–13) asks us to imagine an alien who, upon visiting the earth, witnesses a prevailing air of despair and despondency manifested in “sullen graduate students ... soulless modern architecture ... the death of meaning and wealthy fashion models half-starved and aping death with charcoal makeup.” Setting out to inquire why this is so, the alien is told (by a “self-published poet in Birkenstocks” who is reading Nietzsche) that “we’re atoms in the void ... [d]ust in the wind” and that this viewpoint comes from “Science ... survival of the fittest, everything’s relative, indeterminable”. And why is the poet convinced of this position? Through the writings of “influential human intellectuals,” the “visionaries—Dawkins, Sagan, Weinberg”. Suffice it to say, the world envisioned by Wiker and Witt bears no clear resemblance to the one most readers of this journal live in (though I’ve known a few sullen graduate students), and the influence attributed of Dawkins, Sagan, and Weinberg in the culture at large is surely overstated.

The whole book is, in fact, infused with similarly bizarre views. I offer two, almost at random. Meaninglessness is apparently “the last truth one can still assert in the company of intellectuals without embarrassment, having now the status of a conversational icebreaker, a cocktail party talking point that has taken the place of the weather” (p 17). More astounding is the claim that “in assuming that ‘species’ are not real, Darwinism and the larger re-

ductionist program burn away the original ties that bound the meaning of mathematics to the world and instead leave it stranded in a solipsistic island of the human imagination” (p 237). While there are various schools of thought about the meaning of mathematics (Mario Livio’s *Is God A Mathematician?* [2009], offers an entry-level discussion of these), the claim that “Darwinism and the larger reductionist program” has anything to say about this—and indeed the authors provide no references — is not only bizarre but a trifle paranoid regarding the influence of the English naturalist.

Wiker has a PhD in theological ethics from the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University and has taught philosophy at a number of venues. This has not stopped him offering skewed—and frankly wrong-headed—views of various philosophers. For example, both Jean-Paul Sartre (p 24) and Friedrich Nietzsche (p 107) are described as nihilists. As anyone with even passing knowledge of the writings of these philosophers will know, neither was a nihilist and Nietzsche, in particular, strongly excoriated nihilism. Most egregious perhaps is the treatment of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicurus has served as something of a *bête noire* among theists for millennia now, and while he is not the secular saint that some imagine, he is also not the influential hedonistic nihilist that Wiker and Witt present. Their viewpoint was first articulated in Wiker’s earlier work, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (2002), and has subsequently been echoed by other DI functionaries such as John West. It is clear that Epicurus serves a similar function for ID proponents that Nimrod did for Henry Morris—the individual on whom all subsequent ills can be blamed. (Nimrod, it will be remembered, received the tenets of evolution from Satan himself at the summit of the Tower of Babel, or so Morris speculated.)

The central argument of the book is simple: certain aspects of nature reveal a purpose that reveals the “Genius of Nature”. This term is not to be seen as figurative—there literally is a Genius (namely, God) behind nature, and we can demonstrate this by the example of the existence of Shakespeare’s works, Euclid’s geometry, the periodic table and its elements, fine-tuning in the cosmos, and biological complexity. The degree to which one is convinced by the marshaled arguments will be dictated by one’s exposure to both philosophical argumentation and contemporary science. I remain unconvinced. Of course, the authors would argue that their inability to convince is a product of the brainwashing that the “materialists” have managed to enforce in schools. At fault is not the “average” person but those who “have assiduously sought out and controlled entrance to the seats of academic power, and so they are represented in the tenured offices of higher education and the benches of our courts in disproportionate numbers” (p 239).

There are many other problems with this book. Throughout there is a lack of solid quotes and much nebulous talk of what scientists think and feel. Individuals such as Stephen Weinberg and Richard Dawkins are overly relied on and used as exemplars of the much richer and diverse community of scientists. For a book coauthored by a former instructor of creative writing (Witt), the prose is often florid, even if one is willing to ignore the tendentiousness of the sentiment being expressed: for example, “Materialism has created a kind of flatland that crushes the life out of life, despoiling its native richness, denying its true depth, mudding over its brilliant and variegated hues” (p 46). In short, for a popular work, reading this was a remarkably tedious and miserable task.

A Meaningful World is certainly a work that would not have survived review by a mainstream press. In fact, I would say that it would not have survived as an undergraduate thesis. The very fact that it has appeared in print is symptomatic of the ID movement's ability to find sympathetic pulpits from which to preach to the choir. No one without pre-conceived sympathy is going to be convinced by the arguments presented by Wiker and Witt and, like much ID literature, it serves as a justification of belief rather than a scientific or philosophical investigation. It is notable that the publisher chose not to classify the work as science but as discussing religious aspects of nature and meaning.

REFERENCES

Livio M. 2009. *Is God a Mathematician?* New York: Simon and Schuster.

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