

# A Meaningful World

## The Poison of Meaninglessness

We have been drinking a poison that first infects our heads, then slowly moves to our hearts. It is the poison of meaninglessness. Many people assume that science says the universe is without purpose and everything is a result of random, meaningless events. A recently released book, *A Meaningful World* by Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt,[\[1\]](#) seeks to be the antidote to this poison by looking at science and how certain features of the universe do not fit within the materialistic worldview. This book will be our guide as we consider the question, How does science reveal meaning in the universe? But first, we need to understand the poison before we can discuss its antidote.

Within the scientific community, the assumption of meaninglessness is a result of its members' worldview. Most scientists hold to a materialistic worldview where everything is explained by physical or material causes, which are purposeless, random, natural events. Furthermore, a materialist reduces everything to its basic parts and claims that ultimate meaning lies in these parts. For example, when people say that we are a product of our genes, they are reducing humans to their chemical parts. By this definition, people do not have a soul, and the illusion of human genius or creativity is explained as neurons firing in the brain or animal instinct.

So if that is the poison, what is the antidote? The antidote comes from Christians who break the materialist spell by showing that the world is full of meaning and purpose because it has a Creator. This can be done by looking at scientific evidence for a meaningful world.

A good place to begin is with the idea of genius. Why study genius? Because the most poisonous effect of materialism is the way it skews our self-understanding or our worldview. In a materialistic world without a purpose, there would be no signs of creativity and genius in nature. Before Darwin's time, the evidences of creativity and beautiful design in nature were some of the best arguments against materialism. However, the theory of evolution through random, natural causes denied the masterful work of design.

First, we will learn how to recognize some common elements found in a work of genius by looking at one of the most well-known geniuses of all time, William Shakespeare. Then, we will see if those same elements show up in nature.

## How Do We Know It's Genius? The Example of Shakespeare

*A Meaningful World* describes four elements that will show up in a work of genius: depth, clarity, harmony, and elegance. If the world is designed by an ingenious designer, then we should see these four elements of genius in nature.

How do we detect genius in nature? Let's take a look at the work of a well-known playwright, William Shakespeare, as our model for describing the elements of genius.

Consider the situation in *Hamlet* where we get the famous and often misused line, "Methinks it is like a weasel."[\[2\]](#) The surface reading is that Hamlet and Polonius are looking at clouds and Hamlet observes that one looks like a weasel. As we delve deeper and consider the context, we find that Hamlet is actually exposing Polonius as a weasel himself.

The deeper meaning in Shakespeare's work has intrigued academics for years. And it points us to our first character of genius, *depth* or depth of meaning.

However, depth is nothing if it cannot be detected. So here we come to our next element of genius, *clarity*. Shakespeare did not write the scene with Hamlet and Polonius for his own whimsy, but so that the reader would detect the double meaning in Hamlet's weasel comment. Ingenious works have depth and meaning that beg to be discovered. Hence, they have clarity.

The last two elements of genius go hand in hand: *harmony* and *elegance*. Harmony would describe how various parts—or in Shakespeare's case, how various scenes—are interrelated. In all of Shakespeare's plays, the characters and scenes are related to each other; no scene is random or contradictory to the rest of the play. They are in harmony with each other.

The last element, elegance, is not about parts but about the unifying whole. When all of the parts have come together and operate harmoniously, then we have a new element, in this case a play. No one scene stands alone, but is within a context of the whole. One cannot understand the line "Methinks it is like a weasel" without setting up the context of the play itself.

So from Shakespeare we have identified four important elements to genius: depth, clarity, harmony, and elegance. Let's see if we can find these same elements in nature.

## **Genius in the Periodic Table of Elements**

When we turn to chemistry to see if we find a conspiracy of ingenious design, we will find that, just like a cleverly crafted puzzle that was meant to be solved, when you arrange the elements according to weight, the periodic table makes a stunning natural jigsaw puzzle.

Now that scientists have solved the jigsaw puzzle, they find that it gives us amazing information about atomic properties. This insight has allowed us to make everything from pharmaceuticals to cosmetics to weapons to particle accelerators. So is it just coincidence, or does the periodic

table display the properties of ingenious design?

Let's consider how the periodic table works. When you line the main elements up in groups of eight, the periodic table functions much like a Sudoku puzzle. Elements going across a row, or period, are related in their structure, while elements going down a column are related in their properties. Sudoku puzzles are designed by the puzzle maker with just the right amount of clues for the puzzle to be solved. If you look at the history of chemistry, you will find that the periodic table was first put together because there just happened to be the right amount of clues to give us a reason to be suspicious of design.

Remember those four elements of Shakespeare's work: depth, clarity, harmony, and elegance? It turns out that when we consider the periodic table, these properties across rows and columns display a *depth* of meaning beyond the obvious weight of elements. Secondly, its properties are clear enough for us to discover them, so it has *clarity*. The jigsaw puzzle of the elements arranged in this way display a *harmony* that sings sweetly to chemists' ears; for example it turns out that elements on the right of the table generally combine with elements on the left of the table. Third, the periodic table of elements is *elegant* in how it operates as a functioning whole. We could not know the characteristics of many of the elements without having other elements to compare them to. In this sense, the table reads like a play in which each element is a character whose personality is only really seen in light of the entire cast of characters.

Although a materialist would say that we are nothing but chance chemical reactions, it seems that our chemistry is not so random after all, but that it was designed with us in mind. Next we will find mathematics and physics also have the properties of ingenious design.

# Genius in Mathematics and Physics

The worldview of many scientists would have us believe that the universe is meaningless because it is the result of chance random processes. In mathematics, a language of the universe, do we find the handiwork of genius designer?

In the book *A Meaningful World*, the authors emphasized the *clarity* of mathematics because the ability of the human mind to discern mathematical principles is quite remarkable. The universe seems to follow certain mathematical laws: the pattern of the multiplication table, musical scales, and the beauty of symmetry. These mathematical laws, however, are not elusive. Since ancient times man has been able describe truths about nature in terms of numbers, counting, and patterns.

We can easily find the *harmony* and *elegance* in the language of nature by looking at mathematics and physics. Math has harmony because, starting with basic arithmetic, you can build all the way up to complex principles like calculus and trigonometry. The elegance of mathematics is really seen when applied to physical phenomena. After many years of experiments, we have discovered that the complicated idea of gravity can be described by one simple equation. This is natural elegance.

The *depth* of mathematics is more difficult to grasp because we are so accustomed to using math. After Newton's time, mathematics seemed to be the end all, be all, of the universe. This was stretched to the point that some worshipped mathematics over God. But soon mathematicians and scientists found that we did not actually have the whole picture. With Einstein's theory of general relativity and quantum mechanics, mathematics grew as a field and continues to grow and refine.

Although mathematics is an abstract idea, it is the language of the physical world. As we have seen, mathematics and the way it describes physical phenomena displays clarity, depth, harmony, and elegance. Math is the language that God invented.

And it is one of the ways that He speaks to us of His existence.

## Genius in Biology

Since Darwin's day, biology has been infused with the idea that everything from bacteria to human beings has sprung from the result of random, purposeless, natural causes. But nature seems to show the fingerprints of the creative genius of our creator, God.

Can we see those signs in biology? *A Meaningful World* describes harmony within biology at length. Let's take a look at the cell.

The cell contains many parts: the mitochondria, the nucleus, and DNA. Each of these parts has its particular job to do. And, in addition, each part has a job that is related to all of the other parts of the cell. Think of the cell like a car engine and mitochondria as the carburetor. A carburetor has a specific job in the engine. You cannot talk about what a carburetor is without explaining how it works within the engine. Its job is related to all of the other parts. This is *harmony*, one of our elements of genius.

But what about elegance, depth, and clarity? It seems that these are also apparent in biology. The *elegance* of the cell is how it functions as one intricate machine, like our car engine. The cell is a biological engine; actually it is a very efficient, self-sustaining, self-replicating engine.

What about depth in biology? Let's go back to the cell. Cells get their energy through metabolism. We used to think that this was a simple path with many useless byproducts. Upon closer inspection, one sees that those byproducts have functions within the cell that are necessary for its survival. As we continue to study the cell, we find more and more *depth* to its function.

Finally, how does biology demonstrate *clarity*? Were we meant to find the handiwork of a designer? Most biologists would agree that biology is the study of things that have the appearance of design. If it appears designed perhaps it was, and perhaps we were meant to discover that. The genius behind biology is clear enough that God says that we are without excuse.[\[3\]](#)

Hopefully, you can see that creation is a masterful work of a divine genius. As the book *A Meaningful World* has shown us, nature bears the hallmark of design that has us, its students, in mind.

## Notes

1. Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt, *A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genies of Nature* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006).
2. Hamlet Act 3, Scene 2
3. [Romans 1:19,20](#) (ESV)

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# Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film “Amazing Grace”

*The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace*, a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed[\[1\]](#) transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you're so inclined, owning. Wilberforce's story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

## Slavery then & now

The term "slavery" usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world's history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century British slave trade "was legal, lucrative, and brutal."[\[2\]](#) Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce's day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope



Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.{3}

Latin America's pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent conference:

*My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples...*

*I don't like it. I am not proud of it... It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.*

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

*And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries to an end?{4}*

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, "today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave." {5} "About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States." {6}

Relative to the *chattel* slaves of Wilberforce's day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today's illegally held human "property" comes cheap—and blends in.

Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. "Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world's third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms dealing."[\[7\]](#)

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner, member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. "There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World."[\[8\]](#)

An "alliance of modern Wilberforces" includes "lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz," who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.[\[9\]](#) They seek to repeat Wilberforce's success.

## Opposition in Wilberforce's day

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. "...The entire worldview of the British Empire was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak."[\[10\]](#)

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."[\[11\]](#)

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement" in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, "A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed

slavery and the slave trade{12}, was ignored.” Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the “revival of slavery” in Wilberforce’s time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies “...was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of pagans.”{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce’s convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce’s life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

*...The moral and social behavior of the entire culture...was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.*

## **Wilberforce’s Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}**

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life’s story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one’s day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

*Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith, Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.*

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children, certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: "because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries."

## **The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects**

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he "appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen."[16](#) Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for

grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* ("by faith alone") and *sola gratia* ("by grace alone") formed the foundation of Wilberforce's theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, "He really knew that he was as wicked a sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one's own sinfulness, it's very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee."

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

*...The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living... [The "Nominal Christians" or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce's day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.*[\*{17}\*](#)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."[\*{18}\*](#) Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[\*{19}\*](#) The status of slave was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. "...Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery...in the ancient world, Paul's words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery,

then and for the future.”{20}

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others{21} (much like contemporary believers who buy freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.{22}

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

*...The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.{23}*

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for “who knows which path leads to God?”

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life{24}—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

## Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.

2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, [www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/](http://www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/), accessed 3-22-07.
3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276. Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.
4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.
5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, [www.worldmag.com/articles/12700](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12700), accessed 3-21-07.
6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.
7. *World*, Abraham.
8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day reality of forced servitude around the world" according to World. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.
9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.
10. "Doing good and helping the poor," interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: [www.worldmag.com/articles/12703](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12703), accessed 3-22-07.
11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.
12. "The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: 'Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.' However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch." From Wikipedia entry, "History

- of Slavery," [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave\\_trade#\\_note-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2), accessed 3-23-07.
13. Schmidt, 276.
  14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07
  15. Ibid, entire section.
  16. Schmidt, 277.
  17. "Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice," John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, [www.worldmag.com/articles/12691](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12691), accessed 3-22-07.
  18. 2 Corinthians 3:17
  19. Galatians 3:28
  20. Schmidt, 273.
  21. Ibid, 274.
  22. Ibid, 289.
  23. Ibid, 290.
  24. John 14:6