How the arts and sciences reveal God's genius:

Dr. Jonathan Witt discusses *A Meaningful World*

TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

SPEAKERS

Dr. Jonathan Witt, Mark Turman

Mark Turman 00:01

Welcome back to the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, your host and executive director of Denison Forum. We appreciate you joining us for this conversation for every conversation that we have here on the Denison Forum Podcast, about truth about culture, about the intersection of faith and what's going on in our world today answering hopefully questions that you have.

Mark Turman 00:23

Here in the fall, we're dealing with some of those issues that maybe you and your family may be encountering as kids go back to school, as college students start off into a new semester. Those things about where faith intersect with education, where they intersect with things like science and math and history. We're having those kinds of conversations today.

Mark Turman 00:47

And our guest today will be Dr. Jonathan Witt, who is the executive editor of Discovery Institute Press, and a senior fellow and a senior project manager with Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture. He is the author of a number of books including The Hobbit Party: The Vision of Freedom That Tolkien Got, and the West Forgot, that was written with Jay Richards.

Mark Turman 01:11

He is also the lead writer and associate producer of a documentary called Poverty, Inc., which was the $100,000 Templeton Freedom Award recipient, and has also been viewed and awarded 50 International Festival honors. He additionally scripted three other documentaries that have aired widely on PBS and have been translated into multiple languages airing around the world.

Mark Turman 01:39

Today, we're going to be talking with Dr. Witt about his book, a meaningful world how the arts and sciences revealed the genius of nature. This book was written with Benjamin Whittaker and or Benjamin Wiker and gives an incredible insight into how the magnificence of our world and our pursuits academically point to this this reality of genius, which ultimately points back to the ultimate genius of God. So excited for you to be a part of this conversation today. Thanks for joining us, Dr. Jonathan Witt, welcome to the Denison Forum Podcast. We're glad you're here.

Mark Turman 01:39

Witt's academic essays have appeared in various periodicals, and he's been interviewed numerous times in both regional and national radio programs. He's a regular speaker for Discovery Institute's summer seminar on science and culture, and has spoken at a number of universities on a range of topics connected to political and economic freedom, cultural renewal and the arts. Witt previously served as a tenured professor of literature and writing at Lubbock Christian University. He holds a PhD with honors in English, and literary theory from the University of Kansas.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 02:16

I'm glad to be here.

Mark Turman 02:17

Well, we got a lot of ground to cover. And just to remind our audience, we've been focused on educational type topics here in this season of the year as people go back to school, as college students, high school students all across the ages, getting back into their classrooms, getting their textbooks, getting their assignments, firing up their computers, getting ready for what all of this school year is going to mean, both academically and socially. And so we wanted to talk to Dr. Witt and some others about how things like science and faith and today science, art and faith, how those things are intertwined and how they intersect.

Mark Turman 03:42

And so as we get into that Dr. Witt wanted to see if you just tell us a little bit about your own journey of faith, and how that worked out and then how you ended up doing what you do now at the Discovery Institute.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 03:56

A great question I sometimes joke that I get can get testimony envy. Because you know, there's, you know, beautiful, dramatic, you know, Paul on the road to Damascus testimonials. I was raised in the church. And as a kid, I knew there was never some moment when I thought, I'm an atheist, and we're gonna run away from God. I did have a period where I became, you know, acutely aware of my sinfulness. I would say as I grew, it was for me, it was more getting a stronger sense of God's grace. That was key for me.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 04:36

In terms of intellect, the intellectual part of the journey. I one thing I didn't struggle with, was as I begin to see some of the evidence in nature and the history of biology, that certain things that maybe didn't fit as obviously and to certain ways of interpreting Genesis. That wasn't a huge faith struggle for me. Because by that time I was in college, I was taking a lot of literature courses I was at a Christian university actually had some good. And nowadays, you know, you're talking about going to a Christian

university doesn't necessarily mean that your professors are going to be helpful for your face, unfortunately.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 05:22

But one of the things that I found helpful is that was taking what I was learning about literature, and how poetry and that sort of thing work, and seeing some things in the Bible, realizing that the Bible uses poetry and that sort of thing. And I wasn't one of these people that Oh, Genesis is poetry. So none of its literal, I didn't go down that path. Because so much of Genesis really strikes me as you know, as God's telling, really giving us some facts about life. But I there was a flexibility as I came to some of the particulars in Genesis. So for me, it wasn't a make or break faith issue. For instance, whether the earth was 6000 years old, or much longer, I saw, I could see how a particular reading or Genesis might account for either possibility. So it wasn't a real concern of mine.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 06:18

And even the possibility that evolution was true wasn't a big concern of mine at one of the reasons for that was I had a brother in law, who was a medical, he was in med school, he was really committed to mission work, very faithful Christian. And he himself as he was exploring and wrestling with evolutionary theory, he had some professors that said, you know, God wanted to do it that way, you could have done it that way. And so he actually started exploring evolution with a pretty open mind, just like, you know, I know, I believe God did it. But maybe he used evolution. Well, as he dug, further and further into it with an open mind, he didn't really have an axe to grind, he wasn't going to try to go into being a PhD in biology where there would have been enormous pressure for him to accept the kind of full Darwinian story. He was going into med school, there might have been a little pressure, but he just kind of went into it with an open mind.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 07:11

And he, but as he explored it, he, he came to realize that the case for blind, unguided evolution of all life was extraordinarily weak, and that there was a lot of bluffing involved. And so he recommended a couple of books to me, and I read those. And that started my journey of being quite skeptical of modern evolutionary theory, even if there are certain elements of it. Yeah, polar bears probably did evolve from brown bears, microevolution, but the big picture of mindless, unguided evolution, microbe demand, it just, for me, it fell apart on the evidence. So while that wasn't a make or break issue for my faith, once I saw that evolution had failed, it actually became another source of strength for my faith.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 08:04

Because if evolutionary theory fails, you really, you're at, you're out of luck, as an atheist, Richard Dawkins, the famous evolutionary biologist, public atheist, he put it this way, once: Darwin, and his theory of evolution made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. I think he was exaggerating. But his point is, you need evolutionary theory to be a, an atheist that can in any way kind of have a leg to stand on, because you've got to explain the extraordinary intricacy of the the living world of animals and plants of the molecular machinery we're discovering in sales, you've got to have some other explanation, and then a designer. And if that, if that fails, there's really no other game in town other than a creator.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 08:54

So. So anyway, so I was a professor for a while, I eventually started working for the Discovery Institute, or it's kind of the hub of the intelligent design movement. And so that's allowed me to bring both a kind of a literary aesthetic, because my focus was literature, aesthetics, that sort of thing. And then, of course, working at Discovery Institute in intelligent design, helping edit books, co authors and books, I'm rubbing shoulders with some brilliant scientists. So I had this rare opportunity to be very cross disciplinary. So that's, that's been really exciting.

Mark Turman 09:26

And that's really one of the uniquenesses of, of this conversation, and of the book that we want to talk about is just how close and how intertwined those worlds are. Particularly the world of literature, the world of, of the humanities, the world of history, the world of theology, and how those and the natural sciences are actually deeply deeply woven together. And that's one of the things that drew me for this conversation and to this particular work of yours, but before we get into that, well, maybe it's related to that.

Mark Turman 10:03

One of the things you say early on in the book is that this book that you've written a meaningful world, and we'll get to the subtitle in just a second, but you describe it as an antidote. And you mentioned a couple of the big names in science that really seemed to have dominated the conversation for somewhere around 100 to 150 years, starting with Darwin, and then the presence of Sigmund Freud in

the early part of the 20th century. And now this group record represented by Richard Dawkins sometimes referred to oftentimes referred to as the New Atheists, who really came into prominence triggered in some way, possibly by the events of 9/11 and 2001. And then you had the kind of meteoric rise of the voices of these atheistic scientists have Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Peter Singer, a number of others, who became very aggressive, very militant in their approach of atheistic materialism, naturalism. I think it was Christopher Hitchens, who went so far as to say that religion is a virus on the hardware of humanity that needs to be eradicated. We've talked about that some here at the Denison Forum.

Mark Turman 11:25

But it really does. You can you can see it in popular culture, you can see it in movies, you can see it in other aspects of culture, that it's almost a given that, from Darwin to Dawkins there, they've been largely unquestioned, in a lot of ways for around 100 or so years in our culture. Why do you think that is? How do you think we got to that kind of milieu that we're operating in today?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 11:54

Yeah, that's a that's a great question. It's a very complex question. I think there are a lot of threads, I would say that Darwin's theory of evolution. While it falls apart on close scrutiny, it was maybe the first to offer at least a superficially plausible explanation for the origin of, you know, all these amazing plants and animals we have around us that didn't invoke a creator. And there were forces already in place in Western society that were eager to move toward a atheistic or at least agnostic point of view, culturally.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 12:31

Huxley was where he formed the X club, friend of Darwin's, he wasn't even fully convinced by Darwin's theory, he thought natural selection was too restrictive. If you had if you had to build things using natural selection, and he didn't see how it worked. But he didn't see any other game in town. And he had this program of wanting to move culture away from Judeo Christian religion, kind of free it you know, the shackles of religion. And so he glommed on to Darwin's theory, even though he didn't see it as completely credible, and became a very effective proponent of it is called Darwin's Bulldog. Famously, he is a pretty effective debater. And so I think there were just a lot of forces that wanted something like that.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 13:12

And then, you know, how did how did they kind of march through the institutions that he was in? Antonio Gramsci may be misremembering his name, but he was a Frankfurt School, Marxist who talked about the need to move through the institutions of Western culture, rather than just say, oh, let's try to take over the government. He said you need to move through the universities you need to move through the if you can get into the seminaries do that. And so that's been there a very aggressive program and

Dr. Jonathan Witt 13:43

and to some degree, maybe Christians were kind of asleep at the wheel. We wanted to, you know, baptize people want to, you know, convert people we want. We wanted to tell people about Jesus, which is absolutely crucial important, but you know, I think two minutes or forgot that, that I think it was Kiper Abraham Kuyper that said, there's not one square inch of all creation, about which God does not cry mine. And so I think this has been a wake up call for Christians and other other CSO of goodwill, that we need to be more proactive about culture generally, you know, you know, do we have Christians in Hollywood, we have Christians writing novels, we have Christians that aren't just running for office, but are, you know, trying to shape how we think about politics and political economy. And so I think that's the good news. I think, I think there's kind of a wake up call, that we need to be proactive across culture. We need to be salt and light in in many areas, and not just inside the church building.

Mark Turman 14:49

And it's, yeah, I mean, even just yesterday, I sat down after work with my wife and she started reading to me the testimony of a popular Hollywood figure. Someone that everybody would recognize and started sharing the story of his faith that was published in a recent magazine, and just becoming aware that there is no environment where Christians are excluded or should be excluded. And, as you said, a great wake up call.

Mark Turman 15:19

I'd like to also ask you to comment, just reframing history a little bit. Like I said, if you, you know, Dawkins coming in the latter half, particularly in his influence, in the latter part of the 19th century. But if you take a longer look, I had a part of my conversation with your colleagues, Stephen Meyer, about this that, really the modern scientific movement, even the scientific method that is so predominant in the fields of science today, if you go back 500 years, you find out that, you know, the modern scientific movement that started around the 1500s, was actually initiated by very, very dedicated Christian people

who were wanting to discover more about the majesty of God through what God has created, and what God has enabled us to discover. Can you kind of reframe that conversation of history and remind us of?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 16:15

Absolutely, yeah, that's just a wonderful story. And eyebrow, there was a period where I was working for another think tank that has had some overlap with discoveries through and we did a documentary called The Birth of Freedom, that talked about the Judeo Christian influence on the rise of the good things in Western culture, obviously, since Western civilization is run by humans and humans are fallen sinners, there's been all kinds of atrocities. But if you compare Western civilization, you know, its rise compared to every other major civilization history, you know, they would get they did amazing things. And the birth of science is one of the things we cover there. And so that I would recommend that as a good introduction for like, I don't have time to read a book. Well, the birth of freedom, it also looks at the rise of representative government, the rise of economic freedom, and how many people that's managed to lift out of poverty globally.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 17:15

But yeah, those guys they told man, they were Christians, there might have been some that were, you know, kind of theists. Maybe not compliant, like Newton may have been not a completely orthodox Trinitarian. But but to a man they were all theists, who believed in a rational, loving God, who created the world and humans are made in His image. And so that those those two things combined meant Hey, we could, we could go and study nature carefully and uncover the hidden depths, we talk about nature being a work of genius in our book, meaningful world. And we say that there's these different qualities. I'm getting a little bit ahead of ourselves here. But the one of those is depth,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 18:00

there's a depth to any work of genius. You don't just, you know, read Shakespeare's Hamlet once Oh, I got it all, or go to a really great deep film. Oh, I got it all in the first try. No, you know, there's depths and depths and layers and layers to it. They saw nature as a work of supreme genius. So they expected there to be hidden depths, mysterious things that wouldn't immediately reveal themselves to them. But because they're made in the image of the creator, they thought, hey, if we study it carefully, maybe we can uncover the some of that hidden order. They also believe that God because he's rational, that maybe there's a hidden elegance there.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 18:40

And so, Kepler, he was one of the famous early astronomers who, who want to his discoveries, you know, pretty much since the case for a heliocentric model of the solar system for a long time, you know, practically everybody thought, the sun went around the Earth, and everything went around the Earth. But you know, Copernicus first and Galileo argued, now the sun's at the center of the solar system, and Kepler, he came up with these three laws of planetary motion, and he seized upon the, the ellipses as the shape of the rotations that have a perfect circle. Sometimes, like, well, that ellipses that's kind of messy that's not as elegant as a perfect circle. But he stumbled, and he was searching for it upon this very elegant mathematical formula to describe those orbits. And he said, and this is a paraphrase, when he when he made this discovery, I was thinking God's thoughts after him. And so what is he talking about?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 19:41

He's thinking about, well, he thought of God as a mathematician, he thought God, there would be an elegance to God's creation. You know, you look out with your eyes, and you see a lot of messiness, death and decay and, and, you know, manure turns into soil and worms going through a lot of messy stuff. But he said there's got to also be, in addition to all that comeplexity and depth, I'm thinking there's probably some, some hidden elegance there some, some order. If we can do mathematics as humans think out how much more of a mathematician God is looking for that hidden mathematical order, and they found it. So that's one of the spectacular stories of the history of science.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 20:17

And it flips on its head, the the kind of modern myth that Christianity is somehow opposed to science. Christianity is the is the is the soil in which science was born.

Mark Turman 20:29

Right. And that Christianity in particular has no fear of science, it actually celebrates it, as you said, because the discovery of God that thinking of God's thoughts after him and to see that thread, is, to me, it's just really the importance of a larger, better reading of history, rather than kind of the soundbite type approach that we take to so many things in our world today and really gave the foothold to the New Atheists to the Dawkins and Hitchens of the world. To really miss characterize faith broadly, and Christianity specifically.

Mark Turman 21:09

But But let's go back a little bit to that.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 21:11

Just quick to kind of put it out on that art corals, it was science, it's a cert, that's a search for truth about the natural world. Our quarrel was scientism, which is this philosophy that dresses itself up as just truth seeking science, but it's really a philosophy. It's an atheistic, materialistic philosophy, posing as objective search for truth about nature.

Mark Turman 21:36

Would you? Yeah, thanks for bringing up that term. That's, that's an important term in this conversation and a distinction that people need to be aware of the difference between legitimate science and scientific pursuit, and that of scientism, as what it might even be described? Or would you describe it as a false religion and idolatry? In the context of a Christian terminology? Yeah. Would you put it in those con in that context? Yeah.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 22:04

Because it's not just a way of kind of looking at the world it does. It is a substitute religion, you think science is going to solve everything. And it's not just any kind of science, it's science, yoked to materialism, to this idea that ultimately All there is is matter and energy, your soul isn't real. The idea of an immaterial creator isn't real love. That's just glands chemistry, there's not an authentic, they're good and evil, those are just constructs. So scientism has has a materialistic, philosophical ideological substructure, and it's a substitute religion.

Mark Turman 22:04

I mean, let me get you to chase a rabbit with me on that topic for just a second. And that is, do you think that the the shared experience that we all had over the last three, three and a half years relative to COVID, in the COVID pandemic, you know, there was oftentimes this, this clarion call, and then criticism of we'll just trust the science, just trust the science? Do you think the ideology of scientism has taken a hit in a step backward because of the journey through the pandemic, and that, you know, the world was grappling with something that we had long talked about as a possibility, but now it was upon us. And science couldn't readily and quickly explain it and solve it. Do you think that's kind of hurt the movement of scientism, or affected it in any way.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 23:45

I hope that it has caused a lot of people to rise just because somebody in a white lab coat or the head of some, you know, scientific branch of government says, science says that what was really happening is a particular fallible human being is saying, Here's what I think. And rather than look carefully about the evidence in front of you, I'm going to make a appeal to authority. And that should raise our baloney detector. Why is you know, why is he making this questionable appeal to authority if you can just try it out really powerful evidence for what or what he's saying? So yeah, we saw a lot of flip flopping that I think it should be educational that we need to be not be led around by the nose by somebody just claiming scientific authority.

Mark Turman 24:42

Right. And one of the one of the healthy signs of a healthy person and a healthy scientist for that matter, would be someone who says that it's okay to say I don't know there are just were times when all scientists need to be able to say that with the proper kind of humility and especially when something of a note of the nature of a, hopefully once in a lifetime, once in a millennium global pandemic that we can say, you know, there was just a lot we didn't know. And now we know a lot more, but we don't know everything that we would like to know. And that's, that's always the journey of what I love what life and science is all about.

Mark Turman 25:19

Let's go back to the book a minute. The book is titled A meaningful world. And then the subtitle, how the arts and science revealed the genius of nature. Give us the backstory of what prompted you to write this book in the first place?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 25:35

Great question I was working by then I was working at the Discovery Institute center for science and culture, that's the hub of the intelligent design movement. And so that's some important context because the theory of Intelligent Design in a nutshell, it says that there are things in nature that carry a clear mark, of having been created by a designing intelligence. In other words, they didn't happen by some law, like magnetism or, or something random, like floods or earthquakes or tornadoes, there was a planning for thinking, designer at work, putting that together.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 26:16

So there's certain things in nature, it could be the the molecular outboard motor we call the bacterial flagellum that Michael B makes a really powerful argument. It has the the earmark of design, it could be the fine tuning of the laws and constants of physics and chemistry for life. That's such a problem for atheists that, then the name for that issue, and physics is the fine tuning problem. They're just called the fine creator. Well, it's not a problem to a theist. But some people it's a problem, because why would these? Why would gravity and all these other be just right to allow for stars and planets to form and hundreds of other ways? Steve Meyer probably got into that a little bit. When you talk to him, you can you know, find his stuff online or get his book The return to the god hypothesis, he goes into depth about that. Many Nobel laureates have said, fine tuning points to a designer. So sort of intelligence, right? That's where it kind of stops says, look, there's a designing intelligence, but we said,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 27:20

Ben Weicker, and I said, you know, we don't just have a uniform experience of what intelligent agents can do and can't do and what and what an intelligent can do beyond what say a tornado can do. We have uniform and a rich experience of what geniuses can do, you know, a higher form of intelligence. And since I had a background in the arts, and Ben Weicker had some background in that as well as he was, he's also a, a kind of jack of all trades. Shameless general, like myself, said, let's, let's look at some of the iconic works of genius in western civilization. See, if we find some common themes, characteristics, and then see, go back into nature and see if we find those. And so and so. So we did, we found some common characteristics, we boiled it down to four. And then we show how other you're looking at chemistry we're looking at, at cosmology, whether you're looking at biology, we find these characteristics of genius, so it kind of took it to the next level of goodwill, took the Intelligent Design argument to the next level.

Mark Turman 28:32

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Mark Turman 28:58

Let's go down a couple of those roads because just to kind of give people a framework of what this this book in this conversation is about. It's, it might be expected by people to say how science reveals the genius of nature, but the combination of art and science as the revelation of genius of of this higher

level of of learning that points to the ultimate level of knowledge and understanding that we would find in place in God. And let me just kind of set a little bit of a framework for this part of our conversation is this. It just kind of startled me when when I went from the title into the first part of the book and the whole discussion about how Hamlet as this exquisite piece of literature actually, more I think the book quotes, what you say in there is, Hamlet has been more studied than any other piece of literature except for the Bible. Right? Yeah, it's extraordinary. Yeah, it is extraordinary for me just to hear that. And, but just to go back in and to say, okay, as an expression of something that we find in the world and in an in the human endeavor to find something of this quality of this magnitude and of this, as you said, depth and exquisite nature, how does that point us and revealed these principles of genius, that point ultimately back to God?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 30:40

Yeah, that's so when we use Shakespeare, you know, we could have gone to lots of different places as examples. But you know, we had to get it all in one book. And so we mainly focused on a couple of plays by Shakespeare, and then just kind of briefly, you know, pointed to some other works of genius that, that also illustrated these points, but Hamlet's where we start, and, and we show it illustrating these four characteristics that we boil down of genius,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 31:06

there's works of genius, have a depth to them, you don't just, you know, read, you know, read it once or, or go look at an amazing genius painting and just Oh, yeah, I get it, I'm done. There's layers and layers of meaning and beauty there that if you keep studying,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 31:25

there's a harmony to it. Harmony involves the artful relationship among a variety of parts, a diversity brought into happy Association, if you will, we, the easiest example is musical harmony, you know, when you get four different parts, and they're all blending together. It's, it's, it's a beautiful thing, but they don't blend together. It's, you know, a scary thing. The than in Shakespeare, you know, what is a play by Shakespeare has to do with harmony. Well, he brings these very disparate elements into harmony, he, there's comic elements in Hamlet, there's the course trade, it's a tragedy. So as you would expect, there's tragic elements. There's elevated languages, very earthy, language, sometimes even body. But these elements are not just oh, I'm getting tired of the dark parts, let's have some fun, I will ask over here and have a little body, okay, let's get some elevated language, those different aspects, they

interpenetrate they strengthen each other. It's an old kind of a two plus two is five kind of thing. So there's this rich harmony there,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 32:31

then the elegance, there's an elegance in the play, and I won't go into depth there. But you can see elegance in you know, certain types of poems where the rhyme scheme just neat fits neatly together. In nature, we see elegance, and I've already kind of alluded to this with Kepler's three laws of motion. Everybody's familiar, even if you know, not one and 100 people understand it with with Einstein's special theory of relativity E equals MC squared. I mean, isn't it extraordinary that there's this far reaching, probing insight into physics that can be so compactly Express, so, elegance, you know, it's it's the emphasis there on bringing a unity out of something complicated. So we see that in Shakespeare,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 33:22

we also see, clarity. And clarity isn't like newspaper, like a good newspaper, it's very clear and easy to read. That's not what we mean by clarity. Clarity comes from the Latin clarus. It means bright, shining illustrious evident. Let me give an example that probably most people on this radio show are familiar with the 23rd Psalm. By David, The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want it makes me lie down in green pastures, etcetera, etcetera, this beautiful song. Well, why did he hit us all these metaphors? And you know, that's it's gonna be hard for like a 10 year old kid to get it because he doesn't know about shepherding and, and metaphors can throw him off. Why didn't he say why didn't they would say the Lord takes good care of me. He won't he'll give me everything I need. Water and other stuff. He'll always be there for me even in tough times. That's clear. Well, it's clear but there's no radiance to it there's there's no the power the shining illustrious quality is gone from it. And so works of genius have that that clarity, that radiance about them.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 34:39

So then we took that we took those those four depths, clarity, harmony, elegance, and we said okay, now let's turn to nature and find those. And of course, I've already mentioned how the, the founders of science, they expected depth, they expected elegance, and they went and found a man Another great example is this This Russian chemist from the 19th century Mendeleev, they were starting to build the periodic table of elements that probably gave a lot of us nightmares when we're forced forced to learn it and others dreams and you know, fell in love with a few of us that really got into chemistry,

Mark Turman 35:20

I can still see it, I can still see it on the wall of my seventh grade chemistry,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 35:23

you know, but once you start to get it, even if you don't get all the the depths of it, it's like, wow, there's there's a, there's an order, there's a pattern to it, you know, the, those columns aren't just kind of random, oh, let's put them all up here. And we got to put it on a poster. And so we'll kind of put make it rectangular, you notice how it's not quite everything's even? Well, those columns, the elements, and those columns tend to share characteristics. I mean, they're each distinct. They share characteristics and what Mendeleev did as somebody before him, John Newlands said, I wonder if there's a pattern, an octave pattern, like every eighth element repeats and has something in common, maybe, but then it didn't quite fit. Nevermind, not give up on that.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 36:10

But a Mendeleev, who was a theist believed in a wise creator. He said not I think there's something here, I think there's there is a pattern, I think this law of octaves may be real. And so he stuck to his guns. And he said, You know what, if this law of octave is real, there should shouldn't be an element here that's missing that we haven't found yet. And over here, there should be one that's missing, that should fit in this column, which had it how's that doing science? It's kind of weird. Now, years ago, it's totally, you gather evidence, and you experiment, and you have observations, and then you come to conclusions. But he was doing some of that. But he also had this idea that God, the creator of the of the periodic table, Evans was an orderly God, and there had to be some hidden order. And he stuck to his guns. And because of that, they started, they started turning up the missing elements, gallium in 1875, was the first and it fit, it was like a puzzle, it fit right in where he predicted it would be.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 37:10

So that's just one of many examples of how scientists seeing nature as a work of genius, went out had that framework, and it helps them do science better. So we go through the book and look at different areas, and look at that, whether it's depth, harmony, and that's since we've written it, we could do it, we could do it afterwards. Now, strictly in biology, where we said, we thought we'd given you a good taste of the depths of biology and biochemistry, we were just getting warmed up because of the last 15 years, they're discovering things like in DNA, you'll get stretches of DNA, and you can move it over to a different slightly different reading frame. And it'll create another it'll have some other function, or, and you can read it backwards and forwards, and they'll have two different functions. So imagine a written

human code that, oh, I've read it frontways. Now I'm gonna read this section backwards. And oh, it has a really important meaning to and or software that did that sort of thing. So it's just just off the charts, ingenious stuff that they're discovering.

Mark Turman 38:16

So let me let me get you do define a couple of terms. And then I got another question for you. But just just so I know that I'm on the same page with you. Give me the give me the working definition of how you're using the word genius.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 38:31

Yeah, genius. Who would be artistic genius? Well, genius would just be is loosely termed as somebody that's really brilliant. But it really has a little bit more formal definition. In both both when we think of artistic genius and scientific genius, of doing something deeply original, as well as the extremely difficult and that requires a lot of intelligence. So you might have somebody that's brilliant. But if they're not creating something new, they're having a breakthrough, in the strictest sense of the word genius, you wouldn't call them a genius. So Einstein was a genius, because he had this extraordinary breakthrough, there might be somebody with a higher IQ that could score a little higher on an IQ test than Einstein but that IQ test wouldn't make him a genius in this narrower sense of the word it would be these people that have this ability to make these great creative leaps. So you know, Shakespeare is a genius because of the the creative, just distinct way that he did his plays, but then of course, there was also a greatness to the artistry, it wasn't just that they were different distinct, fresh, okay.

Mark Turman 39:38

So if I follow you correctly, then these qualities the particularly these four qualities of genius, as we find them reflected in in any part of our created world, become reflections of of God as the ultimate genius,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 39:56

the ultimate genius. Yes.

Mark Turman 39:59

Yeah, and

Dr. Jonathan Witt 39:59

and they help and they also help us grapple with some things. Because when you do approach a work of genius, if you do it with the right mindset, like when I first came to Shakespeare in high school, I didn't get all that the language is 400 years old. It's like being thrown on a black diamond ski slope. And, hey, is this fun? You know, you're, you're never skied before? No, it's not fun. It's scary and weird. And I don't know what's going on. For a lot of us, that's our experience of Shakespeare in high school that we dip in, through the weeks assume that kids can pick up you know, 400 year old English. And if not, they're stupid, which No, it's It's almost a foreign language at this point. But if you stick with it, and have Okay, Surely all these people down to the ages that have found this amazing depths and riches in Shakespeare, if I stick with it, and you know, have some aptitude, some people you know, are good at different things, then you're going to uncover some some amazing stuff there. And it's going to start clicking, and you're gonna, you're gonna go, Oh, I see why he did this. Or, you know what, why he didn't just use the simpler way of saying this. Or when you come to, you know, poetry in the Bible, Oh, I see why all this poetic language that made me scratch my head at first. I see now what what the what the writer was up to. So you bring that patience, that humility to the work, and it can make all the difference is the same with when we come to nature?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 41:19

You know, like, why does the Earth have to have earthquakes? You know, God, we're loving, good God, we wouldn't have any earthquakes. Well, maybe, but maybe God has purposes, and reasons that we don't know about. And scientists, by the way, have discovered some purposes, we can circle back then a little bit if you want purposes for our active geology that leads to earthquakes.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 41:43

And then there's theological answers to that, to you know, what, why doesn't God make our lives completely free of suffering and challenges? You know, would that really be good for us? fallen creatures, I mean, there's, there's a reason he had Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden after they sinned wasn't just because he was grumpy at them. He knew that having everything, you know, easy, straight for people that were fallen and sinful, was not what was best for them. I digress a little bit, but but when you when you, but when you're when you think, Hey, this is a genius, I need to approach it humbly. Rather than I'm smarter and better and wiser, and what's this idiot doing? Bring that humility to it, you're gonna learn more, you're going to discover things, it's it's going to be a more joyful, interesting journey.

Mark Turman 42:30

Right. And as a process of revelation, I just, you know, it's hard to have this conversation not be from my chair, thinking about Romans one, and what Romans one tells us about the, the reality of God being revealed on so many of all levels of life, and that the reality of it is, is that we're bumping into expressions and reflections of God's genius all the time.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 42:55

Even without science,

Mark Turman 42:56

and we may not appreciate them. And as you are kind of walking through these qualities, it makes me think along these lines of, you know, when you read a great novel, or you see a great work of film, you know, I, I think of a couple of Stephen King films that come to mind actually, when I think about depth, and I'm like, Oh, wow, you know, if I go back and think about that movie again, or I think about that novel again, or I go back and watch that movie, again. I'm like, Oh, I didn't see that before. And that that idea of depth and layer is in there as it pertains to a great story.

Mark Turman 43:33

If you talk talk about harmony, and and as, like you said, we probably all most resonate with that one quickly. Because of what we know when a piece of music is not done in harmony, it's painful to our ears. And we're like, oh, that's just this is not good music. I just, I just don't want to be around that. And it's not good music. It doesn't sound right. Because we have this internal sense of what harmony and and the intersection of harmony might look like. Clarity, your example about the 23rd Psalm is really helpful.

Mark Turman 44:10

I gotta tell you, the doctor with the one I'm struggling with a little bit is elegance is wrapping my my understanding around this quality of elegance as an expression of beauty as an expression of genius. Can you unpack that one just a little bit more for me? Is it simply unity or is it more than unity?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 44:33

Yeah, that was when when we formulated theirs. I was struggling a little bit. How do we distinguish harmony and elegance because they're so closely related? I finally, you know, told Ben, I think they're really there to you're coming at the same thing from two different angles, and it's kind of the emphasis is

more. So elegance is a type of harmony, but the emphasis is on a very compact unity among a diversity.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 44:58

So, again, give the example of you know, you got all these planets coming around these sun, right? They've got different orbits and some are out are far near. And they're not all exactly on the same plane though they're very close to the same plane, interestingly. But then Kepler comes up with this, this these laws, these three very elegant laws that describe all that diversity. And so that would be an example of elegance

Dr. Jonathan Witt 45:27

we see in nature. Are you familiar with the Fibonacci number? Yes, there's this Fibonacci number. The number is enough to remember how it's like, you get it by adding the last two numbers, one plus two is three, two plus three is five. Three plus five is eight. Anyway, then there's this number that comes out of that ratio. And we see that the golden rectangle uses the Fibonacci number. We see spirals all through nature that use this Fibonacci number, the shell of a nautilus, the spiral of galaxies, the number of seeds in, in sunflowers, there might there might well have a Fibonacci number, it might be a one, or it might be a bigger sunflower, but it's always going to have this Fibonacci number two, but are almost always just hundreds of examples. So there'll be an answer an example of elegance in nature, where Wow, so there's this, this Fibonacci number cropping up all over nature,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 46:32

Eugene Wigner, he was a science thinker. And he, he talked about the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics for the natural sciences. And that's just like the fine tuning problem. But it's only unreasonable if there's, if there's not a God in heaven, there's not a creator. But if, if the Creator God is a master mathematician, and when he was creating this elegant universe, and there's a documentary about the white called The Elegant Universe, I don't think the people that made it were believers, but they see the elegance in nature. So you find that that mathematical elegance cropping up all over the place.

Mark Turman 47:11

So talk about that, I'm glad you brought math because I'm, I just am sitting here imagining, you know, my, my young granddaughter learning, learning her numbers, and eventually learning her mathematical

or multiplication tables, and ultimately long division, thinking about that kid that's encountering algebra, or calculus, for the first time, have had some exposure to the English professor, John Lennox, who is a world renowned mathematician, it seems like so many things come back to the beauty and genius that is revealed in mathematics and so many things, even theologically, they come back to a connection to an even an anchoring within mathematics.

Mark Turman 48:03

And if you, you know, to the person, the average person that may be listening to this, if you've ever had that joy of balancing and reconciling your checkbook, and doing that regularly, and having some problems with it, and then figuring it out, and the joy that comes through that. Or if you're an accountant, and you've ever drafted a budget for a company, and then though that budget actually worked itself out in in real time and in real business, and then you were able to reconcile that you're touching on some of the genius of mathematics, not to mention the connection between mathematics and something like music. But can you touch a touch upon how these qualities of genius particularly express themselves mathematically, not only what you were just talking about, but perhaps in other ways, as well?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 48:54

Well, let me back up a minute I thought of example of elegance. In biology, we are biologists often so because sophisticated and complex, we don't say elegance isn't usually the term it's like dizzying sophistication or something like that. But when Watson and Crick were trying to discover the structure of the DNA molecule, they implicit even though I don't think either those guys at the time were believers, but they inherited this cultural tradition, heritage of theistic science that said look for elegance, look for harmony look for death. And they would reject as they kept doing the do these toy models of of what they thought the the DNA molecule shape like, and kept comparing it with what little bit of microscopic evidence that we're able to glean at the time, and they would reject possibilities that were too kludgy, too inelegant. And when they when they finally hit upon that they got a bit of an x ray crystallography image by a female scientist and another lab. That's a different story. We were they misbehaved a little bit there.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 50:03

But then of course, that other lab couldn't, couldn't figure it out from that, at least at that moment, they could maybe if they'd had longer, but Watson, Greg took it back. And they looked at it, there's this kind

of cross thing. And they came up with the chair, what about a double helix? Like, take a picture a ladder, that's twisted. And, and so the, that gives you this double helical structure, and says, What if that was and that would also kind of help explain how DNA copies as the two parts could, could come apart. And then they could attach and, of course, be very sophisticated copy, but at least we'd have the first inkling of how that might be happening. But it was the elegance of it, that that was a big part of what caught their attention to say, let's, let's double down and and explore that option.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 50:48

So anyway, but you asked about, do you ask about mathematics and music, as well,

Mark Turman 50:56

just how mathematics is so much an expression of genius, and in multiple areas.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 51:03

So yeah, one of my weakest areas in terms of expertise is music. But it's probably anybody knows, even if you're not a musician, you know that music theory is just rife with mathematics. And, you know, you get, you get the different octaves by any you can take a string that's, you know, wire and you loop it into and, and then half it and you get roughly an octave and that C note and then a C note later, they sound good together this, there's something common about them. And that's just the tip of the iceberg about how much how mathematical music theory is, most people who are really good at music, they just pick it up, they may not even know math, but there's mathematics, you know richly under that.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 51:47

And of course, chemistry, drive with mathematics, physics is almost all mathematics. At this point. Even you know, before Einstein, you know, Isaac Newton's, his great landmark work was just, you know, rich in mathematical equations, cosmology, mathematics, understanding thermodynamics, the different laws of thermodynamics, which is now helping us understand things like blood flow, and how different things in the body work on a one book, I'd recommend if you're really, you're not as into kind of Arts and Sciences, where you're like, I like biology, and there's a book called Your Designed Body. This written by a physician and a systems engineer, and they take a systems engineering perspective to, to the body and there's so much harmony there, it's unbelievable. And in places elegance, but the harmony of these interacting systems and some of that, some of the breakthroughs and understanding how fine tuned the human body goes back to, you know, requires a mathematical analysis, how certain things

are being kept in these very narrow ranges, some of the chemicals in our body and why they need to be kept in those narrow ranges. So mathematics is indispensable to so many fields science,

Mark Turman 53:14

just makes me makes me think if you've ever gotten the lab report from your doctor at an annual physical, you know, how did they come up with these ranges that you know all these things in your body needed to be within this number and that number? And when they're not then they start going looking for causes and and problems?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 53:31

Yeah, and this is this book I'm in of course, I want you to go and buy my book. But if you buy a second book, after you bought a meaningful world by Jonathan Witt and Ben Wiker, take a look if you're interested in human biology at this book, you're designed body they go through and we take a lot of these for granted. Oh, yeah, my phosphate level or, you know, whatever mine levels in the right zone? You know? Of course it is. No, your body has to be doing all these ingenious things to keep all of those at just the right level. Like I said, even a cell you think, oh, cells got X amount of stuff in it. And it's got these ratios Well, on the outside of the cell, the ratios are completely different. So how is it maintaining this very, these are very different ratios that it needs to you know,

Dr. Jonathan Witt 54:13

homeostasis is the word. If it loses homeostasis, it becomes like its environment. When you become like your environment, you become dead. You know, when you die that your body you know, ashes to ashes, dust at us, all that hard working ingenious stuff that's maintaining hope homeostasis between the individual cells, all the different organs of the body that quits and it starts to, you know, return to room temperature and in a whole lot of other ways, like the environment. It's that genius of the art design bodies that keeps it keeps it going as long as it does.

Mark Turman 54:49

Just fascinating. We could, I just felt like we could I could continue to just ask questions all day long. But as we get ready to wrap up and just kind of think I want to I want to go back to what you're calling like Stephen Meyer was talking about, and what you referenced a little while ago about earthquakes and other things like earthquakes within our experience.

Mark Turman 55:09

Dr. Meyer alluded in our conversation to how we might understand the presence of miracles, as they're described in the Bible, as they're described in the life and work of Jesus. And he said, you know, perhaps a better way for us to understand those kinds of things in answer to Dawkins and others would be that if we, if we accept the idea of God, and then we accept his ability to intervene in his creation, that those expressions of miracle are not really the interruption of physical laws and the way things normally operate, they're actually a glimpse of the restoration of them, that when, just for instance, Jesus healed the person, he was not interrupting natural processes as much as he was picturing the resetting of them the way they should ultimately always be. And we would go on to say, we'll be in the kingdom of God.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 56:09

That's beautiful.

Mark Turman 56:11

Talk about that, from the standpoint of, okay, how, how is that possibly a reflection and an, an expression or an answer to the presence of things, you know, this common idea of, well, if there is a God, and if he is a genius, and if he is good, that how can he let things like a pandemic? How can he let things like cancer? How can he let things like a hurricane or an earthquake happen? How do we, how might we think about those things in a cohesive, reasonable way?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 56:43

Yeah, I think you come at two levels. One is, scientifically some of the things that have been pointed to is That's pointless. It has no like earthquakes. That's point well, it turns out our active geology is crucial to earth being livable and habitable over 1000s and millions of years. The way our the plate tectonics, continental shelf recirculate things, and there's a great book called The trying to think with a wonder of water. Where Michael Denton, an Australian geneticist, gets into all the ways that act of geology, including water, and all the ways waters done help us. So that's one example.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 57:30

You know, you talked about Richard Dawkins comply? Well, a wise God wouldn't have made the human eye the way it is, it's backwardly wired. And we've got a little tiny little blind spot in our eye. Most of us

aren't even aware of the blind spot, it's so tiny, and, and easy to ignore. But as it turns out, there's good engineering reasons for the quote unquote, backward wiring of the eye that the Dawkins just ignored, because he was so quick to jump on and critique the wiring of the eye improved, improves oxygen flow, ultimately improves visual acuity.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 58:06

And so you know, engineers get this very quickly that they know that any any kind of complex system, there's going to be trade offs. And you can't have you know, you can't have the sports car, the best sports car in the world, that's also got the most hauling capacity, know that you're going to need a pickup for that. So there's trade offs. So he ignores all that, and he found something he didn't quite understand. And he jumped on it and criticized it. Whereas if it said, Who and maybe there's a reason for that, now, so that's the scientific, you know, be humble, maybe there's a reason for it.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 58:38

So you get things like, Well, what about diseases where a little kids, you know, die, or they go blind? And that just seems terrible? And it is, but then you have to realize you're also asking a theological question. When you say, why would a good God allow suffering and pain and death? And some people unfairly, they ask a theological question, but then they, they won't allow a theological answer. They're online to say, Okay, you're talking. You're asking about God and His nature? Well, God has revealed Himself to us through His Word, through His Son, Jesus, and he's given us resources to understand why a good God might allow suffering it has to do with and it's not a simple answer. It has to do with he made free creatures, he made humans free, they fell into sin, there's indications he made angels free and some of them fell, maybe the seems to be the source of Satan and all the mischief he's sowed in the world. He knows our hearts I talked about earlier about Adam and Eve being kicked out of the garden and wouldn't just because God was huffy, because they took some of his fruit off his tree. He knew that to restore them. They had to enter into suffering and be challenged and be humbled so that he could bless them in a greater way. But, but those are theological answers.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 59:59

Of course, there's you know, You can have many shows, you know probing plumbing those. My main point here is people that ask good theological questions. They're ones we should all wrestle with and and concern ourselves with should though be willing to hear theological answer should be willing to go

to those that mode of knowledge to get answers. And it's it's that scientism that false philosophy that ask a theological questions is, oh, I don't want to hear a theological answer.

Mark Turman 1:00:34

They want to skip categories at times.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 1:00:36

Yeah. Science is gonna solve everything. And if you can't solve well, that proves that there's no God. No, that's not good logic.

Mark Turman 1:00:43

Right. Dr. Witt, thank you. It's such a fascinating conversation and such an important, insightful and yes, challenging book, a meaningful world, how the arts and science revealed the genius of nature, I would encourage our audience to pick that up and other work that you've done if they want to track and follow more of what you are doing these days. Where can they find you besides the bookstore?

Dr. Jonathan Witt 1:01:10

Yeah, I would go to discovery.org. That's Discovery Institute. And in North, you'll see a section for intelligent design, you can go to the fellows there, you'll find my page under under the senior fellows there. And then of course, there's a lot of other great material. A lot of other great site, I talked about rubbing shoulders with some brilliant scientist. It's just been so exciting. Michael B. Jonathan wells, Stephen Meyer, others. So it's just a great resource discovery.org/id.

Mark Turman 1:01:43

All right. We'll put that in the show notes as well. And just want to thank you, but also thank our audience for being a part of the conversation today. If this has been helpful to you, please rate review us on your podcast platform and share this with your friends, your family. It really a lot for us to think about a lot for us to learn and a lot for us to celebrate about the beautiful design and genius of God as as it is revealed around us and in us and all around us. And again, Dr. Witt, thank you for your time today.

Dr. Jonathan Witt 1:02:12

Thank you, Mark.