

Do the Heavens Declare the Glory of God? Toward a Biblical Model of Intelligent Design

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Psalm 19:1 is one of the most beloved and well-known verses in the Bible. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands.” Throughout most of church history, this verse has been used to affirm the belief that God reveals Himself through nature. Often termed “natural revelation” or “natural theology,” this form of divine disclosure has been seen as complementing the “special revelation” of the Creator found in Scripture; in particular, the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.¹ Therefore, in answering the question posed in the title of this paper—Do the heavens declare the glory of God?—most Christians would answer a resounding “yes.”

The Belgic Confession (1561) provides an insightful summary of the belief that God reveals Himself both through the natural world and more fully in the Bible. Article II, entitled “The Means by Which We Know God,” states,

We know him by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them *without excuse*.

Second, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.²

This passage reflects the time-honored metaphor of viewing nature as a book—the Book of God’s Works. Implied in Article II is the belief that natural revelation is limited, because the Lord is “more clearly and fully known to us” through Scripture. Yet despite this limitation, the revelation in nature is so clear and powerful that it not only “convict[s]” men and women, but it “leave[s] them without excuse” regarding the Creator’s existence and some of His attributes. The heavens not only declare the glory of God, but they call humans to accountability before their Creator.

This paper attempts to explore the truthfulness of natural revelation and whether or not the heavens do indeed declare God’s glory. Within evangelical circles today, the notion of natural theology is often categorized with the concept of intelligent design.³

For our purposes, intelligent design is defined as the *belief* that beauty, complexity, and functionality in nature point to an Intelligent Designer. The paper opens by examining three prominent evangelical theologians who have reconsidered the veracity of traditional approaches to natural theology. Next, passages in the Bible

dealing with God's revelation in nature are presented. In order to demonstrate the revelatory impact of design in nature, we will then look at three famous religious skeptics. The paper closes by proposing a biblical model of intelligent design and offers some design interpretations.

Natural Theology Reconsidered

Karl Barth: An Attempt to Unite Yahweh with Baal

Karl Barth was one of the most influential evangelical theologians of the 20th century. He based his famed *Church Dogmatics* (1936-1969) on a view of divine revelation that claimed the "Eternal God is to be known in Jesus Christ and *not elsewhere*."⁴ As a consequence, Barth rejected the idea that there is "a point of contact" between finite sinful humans and the infinite holy God.⁵ In particular, he vehemently rejected all forms of natural theology, contending that any knowledge of God drawn from nature was impossible, because the Image of God had been destroyed in humans. As he notes, "What is possible from the standpoint of creation from man to God has actually been lost through the Fall."⁶ Barth even viewed natural theology as a threat to biblical revelation.

The logic of the matter demands that, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A natural theology which does not strive to be the only master is not a natural theology. And to give it place at all is to put oneself, even if unwittingly, on the way which leads to this sole sovereignty.⁷

In fact, Barth went so far as to claim that natural theology was idolatrous and pagan. It is "an attempt to unite Yahweh with Baal, the triune God of Holy Scripture with the concept of being of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy."⁸

Some have attempted to justify Barth's rejection of natural theology by claiming it was in reaction to the natural theology concocted by the Nazis.⁹ The National Socialists proclaimed that Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was God-sent and a new revelation that was to be placed alongside Scripture, both "equally binding and obligatory" and "demanding obedience and trust."¹⁰ Though there is certainly truth in this justification, Barth was also impacted by mediaeval theologian Anselm's theological approach, depicted in his aphorism: "For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that 'Unless I believe, I shall not understand.'"¹¹ In other words, theology is presuppositional. Barth contended that we must begin with faith and Scripture, and only then can we comprehend the world around us.

To be sure, the Word of God certainly illuminates our ability to understand. As the foundational principle in the first chapter of the Book of Proverbs states, "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (v. 7; cf, Is 33:16, Ps 111:10). However, Barth

fails to acknowledge that Scripture also includes an evidential approach and affirms a divine revelation through nature. For example, the apostle Paul in defending the Gospel to pagans appealed to evidence from the natural world. He argued, “God has not left Himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:17; see also Acts 17:22-31). In this way, Paul used the “testimony” of nature as “a point of contact” in order to “bring the Good News” (v.15). Natural revelation can function as a preamble to Christian faith.

Thomas Torrance: Transformation of Natural Theology

Though certainly appreciative of concerns raised by Barth, Thomas Torrance proposed that there was place for a “transformed” natural theology within the larger discipline of what he termed “Scientific Theology.”¹² Impacted by Athanasius’ dictum, “It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him ‘Father,’ than to name Him from His works and call Him ‘Unoriginate,’”¹³ Torrance argued that “traditional” natural theology “abstracts the existence of God from his act [i.e., his act of creating; the creation], so that if it does not begin with deism, it imposes deism upon theology.”¹⁴ In particular, Torrance contended that natural theology was rooted in the Enlightenment desire to cast theology entirely within the confines of human rationality, leading eventually to biblical revelation being set aside.

Similar to Barth, Torrance argued that our knowledge of God *only begins* with His self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the Trinity, and that all other starting points are invalid. He writes,

Revelation means immediately the refutation of all else that purports to be knowledge about God. Revelation means that all other knowledge is not knowledge at all. If revelation means the revelation of what is otherwise not known and is hidden, then it puts out of court our ordinary knowledge about God—yes, even our knowledge gained through the examination of our moral and mystical experience. All indirect revelation—as it is called—or all general revelation is confuted by the fact of [special or biblical] revelation.¹⁵

Like Barth, Torrance feared that the “danger” in traditional natural theology is “its independent character,” and “that once its ground has been conceded it becomes the ground on which everything else is absorbed and naturalised, so that even the knowledge of God mediated through his self-revelation in Christ is domesticated and adapted to it until it all becomes a form of natural theology.”¹⁶ Or to state this concern more incisively, Torrance scholar Elmer Colyer contends that according to “this kind of approach, the doctrine of the Trinity comes as an addendum to an independently developed doctrine of the One God in which the two are not integrally related.”¹⁷

Yet Torrance believed that a natural theology transformed in the light of Christian faith provides a lens through which to see the world properly.

Once we have known God, known him as Redeemer and so as Creator, we do come to see that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork [Ps 19:1]. Granted that, but that is possible because *we know God already*. That is, the world is then a kind of symbol which helps us realize the God we *already know* by an act in which He has conveyed His presence and person.¹⁸

Torrance's transformation of natural theology is a radical shift from Scripture and Christian tradition which affirm that nature points to the existence of God and reveals some of his attributes (Rom 1:20), and can even be used as a preamble to the Gospel (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31). According to the presuppositional approach of Torrance, we must first believe in the Trinitarian God self-disclosed in Scripture, and only afterwards can we grasp His revelation in nature. Or to answer the question posed in the title of this paper—Do the Heavens Declare the Glory of God?—Torrance would answer a qualified “yes, but only to Christians.”

Alister McGrath: A New Vision for Natural Theology

Few will question that Alister McGrath is the most important evangelical theologian in the world today and also evangelicalism's leading science-religion scholar. Steeped in the scientific theology of Thomas Torrance, he outlines what he terms “a new vision for natural theology.”¹⁹ In light of Psalm 19:1, McGrath asks the provocative questions, “What if the heavens are ‘telling [declaring] the glory of God’ in a language that we cannot understand? What if the glory of God is really there in nature, but we cannot discern it? . . . If nature is itself inactive and passive, what is the mechanism of the disclosure of glory?”²⁰

In answering these questions, McGrath asserts, “Nature does not itself proclaim the divine glory; yet such glory may be discerned within it.”²¹ He proposes that “the enterprise of natural theology is thus one of discernment, of seeing nature in a certain way, of viewing it through a particular and specific set of glasses.”²² McGrath explains,

Nature is here interpreted as an ‘open secret’—a publicly accessible entity, whose *true meaning is known only from the standpoint of the Christian faith*. This rests, however, not upon any attempt to ‘prove’ the existence of God from observation in nature, but upon the capacity of the Christian worldview to comprehend what is observed, including the human capacity to make sense of things. The explanatory fecundity of Christian faith is affirmed, in that it is seen to resonate with what is observed. . . This idea of a “hidden meaning” or “covert interpretation” of nature is to be contrasted with the belief [i.e. the traditional view of natural theology] that nature is capable of being interpreted in a single way, valid for all times, places, and cultures.²³

McGrath's presuppositional natural theology gives Christians an interpretation of nature that offers "consonance" or "resonance" between the creation and their faith.²⁴ This approach is not "a proof for the Christian belief in God," but at best it is only "deeply suggestive."²⁵ In this way, McGrath contends that the "inner coherence" within his natural theology "reinforces an *existing* belief in God"²⁶

But according to McGrath, "Those who are 'outside'" of the Christian tradition "will *never* 'see' the true meaning of the open secret in nature."²⁷ For non-Christians the creation is "shadowy, opaque, and ambiguous."²⁸ Stated another way, McGrath asserts that "we could say that the natural order, when viewed through the prism of the Christian tradition, ceases to be a *noise* and becomes a tune."²⁹ But is this in fact true? For men and women lacking faith in Christ, do the heavens declare nothing but "noise"?

Scripture, Natural Revelation & Intelligent Design

The terms "natural revelation," "natural theology," and "intelligent design" do not appear in the Bible. However, the concept that nature reveals the Creator through the handiwork of His creation is certainly affirmed in the Word of God. The two most important biblical passages dealing with natural revelation are Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-23; and Wisdom 9:1-13 from the Apocrypha complements these scriptures.³⁰ These three passages assert that the creation features an intelligible, non-verbal (i.e., it does not use actual words; Latin *verbum*: word) divine revelation, and that this disclosure points to a Creator, revealing some of His general attributes. In addition, Romans 1 and Wisdom 13 indicate that humans are accountable before God with regard to the implications of this revelation that He has inscribed on nature.

Psalm 19: The Heavens Declare the Glory of God

Psalm 19 is structured on two panels that could be entitled, "The Book of God's Works" (v. 1-6) and "The Book of God's Words" (7-11). The first panel is a rich source of spiritual truths regarding natural revelation.

¹The heavens declare the glory of God;

the firmament proclaims the work of His hands.

²Day after day they pour forth speech;

night after night they display knowledge.

³They have no speech, they use no words;

no sound is heard from them.

⁴Yet their voice [or line] goes out into all the earth,

their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

⁵which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,

like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

⁶It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other;

Nothing is deprived of its warmth.

This marvelous passage identifies six characteristics of the divine revelation in nature.

(1) The creation is *active*. The use of five active verbs in such a short passage emphasizes that the physical world thrusts itself upon us. The heavens “declare,” the firmament “proclaims,” both of these structures “pour forth” and “display,” and their voice “goes out.” Clearly, this is in sharp contrast to McGrath’s view that “nature is itself inactive and passive.”³¹

(2) This activity arising from nature is *intelligible*. The psalmist employs four terms associated with intelligent communication to assert that this revelation is comprehensible: “speech,” “knowledge,” “voice,” and “words.” This is far from McGrath’s view that nature is “shadowy, opaque, and ambiguous” and only emits “noise.”³²

(3) Natural revelation is *non-verbal*. As verse 3 states, the heavens and the firmament “have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.” Yet the psalmist in verse 4 quickly qualifies that a “voice” and “words” do indeed go out into the world, and that this non-verbal communication effectively reveals a message about the glory and workmanship of God. Natural revelation is like music. It does not use actual words, yet similar to a magnificent symphony it certainly speaks to everyone.

(4) The “speech,” “knowledge,” “voice,” and “words” emanating from the creation are *incessant*. They never stop and are heard constantly “day after day” and “night after night” throughout time. Notably, this revelation was not first understood with the appearance of Christians and in particular Trinitarians as suggested by Torrance and McGrath.

(5) This revelation is *universal*. It is like cosmic music. In fact, the noun “voice” in verse 4 is actually the Hebrew word *qaw*, which means “line.” In this context, it can be rendered as “a chord of music” in a heavenly hymn.³³ And everyone hears this melody in nature since it travels “into all the earth” and “to the ends of the world.” For the psalmist, this natural revelation is not restricted to the Hebrew people. In contrast to McGrath, “nature is capable of being interpreted in a single way, valid for all times, places, and cultures.”

(6) The message in the cosmos is a *divine revelation*. It is authored by God, and it is about God. Natural revelation transcends the physical world which transports it. Without the use of actual words, the “voice” in nature “declares the glory of God” and “proclaims the work of his hands” to every man and woman.

It is worth pointing out that Psalm 19 also offers a subtle insight regarding biblical interpretation. The psalmist refers to the 3-tiered universe, making reference to “the firmament,” “the ends of the world,” the heavens being structured like a “tent,” and the daily movement of the sun which “rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other.” The central spiritual truth in this psalm—God reveals Himself through the creation—transcends this incidental ancient understanding of nature (or ancient science) In other words, knowing the actual structure and operation of the world is not essential for believing in intelligent design. And by implication, neither

is knowledge of the origin of the universe and life. The biblical notion of design focuses on the belief *that* nature reflects design, and not *how* design arose.

To summarize, Psalm 19 reveals that the natural world features intelligibility and points to an Intelligent Designer. Such a belief is neither idolatrous nor pagan as Barth proclaimed. Instead, Scripture unambiguously affirms the reality of natural revelation.

Romans 1: Men Are Without Excuse

Romans 1:18–23 also affirms the revelation in nature. In the first part of this passage, the apostle Paul writes,

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, *so that men are without excuse* (my italics).

This passage has a number of features that are similar to Psalm 19. (1) The creation is *active*. The impact of “what has been made” by God upon humans is so powerful that they are “without excuse” because of this revelation. (2) The activity arising out of nature is *intelligible*. Similar to the psalmist, Paul employs terms associated with intelligent communication to describe natural revelation: “known,” “seen,” and “understood.” (3) The revelation in nature is *non-verbal*. Though Romans 1 is not as explicit as Psalm 19 regarding this characteristic, it is certainly implied. The wordless creation discloses some of God’s “invisible qualities.” (4) The creation’s message is *incessant*. It has emanated ever “since the creation of the world.” In contrast to the beliefs of Torrance and McGrath, this revelation was understood well before the appearance of Christians and in particular Trinitarians. (5) This cosmic revelation is *universal*. Since it is wordless, natural revelation has been “made plain” and is “clearly seen” by everyone in the world. Again, it is not limited to Christians and Trinitarians. (6) The cosmos offers a *divine* revelation. The creation is like a book in which God has written “His eternal power and divine nature.”

However, Romans 1 goes further than Psalm 19 and includes two more features about natural revelation. (7) The message in creation is *dismissible*. Even though this divine disclosure is “plain” and “clearly seen” by everyone, God has given humans the freedom to reject it, ignore it, or even call it an illusion. But there are consequences. (8) The creation makes humans *accountable*. The intelligible “voice” in nature puts us in a position where we are “without excuse” regarding its profound implications. In particular, there is no justification whatsoever for “godlessness and wickedness” or for anyone to “suppress the truth,” because the creation is a constant witness declaring to men and women the existence of an eternal, powerful, and divine Creator.

The apostle Paul also indicates that natural revelation and intelligent design are intimately connected to human sin and the first two Commandments. Continuing with Romans 1:

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and ²³exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

According to Paul, the pursuit of knowledge of God is closely related to the spiritual state of an individual. Violation of the First Commandment (I am the Lord your God) and the Second Commandment (Do not make idols) impacts the human ability to think. By substituting the Creator for idols of animals and “mortal man,” Paul asserts that violators “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom 1:25). More specifically, they “became fools” and “their thinking became futile.” Clearly, this passage reveals that sin causes intellectual dysfunction. And this dysfunction can manifest with the issue of intelligent design when the divine revelation in nature is dismissed and the falsehood that it is merely an illusion is embraced.

Wisdom 13: Greatness and Beauty a Corresponding Perception of the Creator

To further explore the notion of natural revelation and intelligent design, Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–9 offers insights that magnify Psalm 19 and Romans 1.

- ¹ For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the Artisan while paying heed to His works.
- ² But they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.
- ³ If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the Author of beauty created them.
- ⁴ And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the One who formed them.
- ⁵ For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.
- ⁶ Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him.
- ⁷ For while they live among His works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful.
- ⁸ Yet again, *not even they are to be excused* (my italics).
- ⁹ For if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?

Wisdom 13 expands our understanding of natural revelation and intelligent design. Most notably, it includes four direct references to the beauty in nature (v. 3 twice, 4, 7). This passage presents a marvelous balance between the artistic (“the beauty of these things”) and engineered (“their power and working”) aspects of design. Hand-in-hand, “the greatness and beauty of created things” offer “a corresponding perception of their Creator,” who is both the “Author of beauty” and the “Artisan” of the workings of nature.³⁵ And similar to Romans 1, violation of the First and Second Commandments appears. Instead of worshipping the Creator, the people prefer to worship created things like “fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven.” However, like Paul in Rom 1:20, the author of Wisdom 13:8 declares that there is no justification for such idolatry and foolishness, because “not even they are to be excused.”

To summarize, Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:18-23, and Wisdom 13:1-9 confirm the reality of a non-verbal revelation in nature that reflects intelligent design to everyone, everywhere, in every generation. These passages assert the Book of Nature is *sufficient* in revealing the Creator, and humans are *proficient* in discerning its spiritual meaning and implications.

The Revelatory Impact of Nature

Karl Barth contends that there is no “point of contact” between humans and God to be found in the natural world. Thomas Torrance believes that “all indirect revelation,” such as natural revelation, “is confuted by the fact of [biblical] revelation.” Alister McGrath believes that the creation is “inactive and passive,” “shadowy, opaque, and ambiguous,” and merely emits “noise.” And according to Torrance and McGrath, a credible natural theology exists only if nature is viewed through a Christian and Trinitarian lens. However, these assessments of natural revelation fall short of the biblical evidence presented in the previous section. In order to test the reality of a revelation in nature, three skeptics of religion are presented to see whether or not the heavens declare the glory of God and have impacted them.

Richard Dawkins: Complex Design Cries Out for an Explanation

Richard Dawkins is the most important atheist in the world today, and he is obsessed with the notion of intelligent design in nature. This is not to say that he believes in the reality of design, because he certainly does not. But it is reasonable to say that anyone who writes an entire book attempting to dismiss design, such as Dawkins’ *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), seems to be quite consumed by the topic. Why would any atheist bother? Could it be that Dawkins feels the impact of the revelation in nature and that he needs to justify his rejection of its clear message?³⁶

In the opening pages of *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins with remarkable candor reveals,

The problem is that of complex design. . . . The complexity of living organisms is matched by the elegant efficiency of the *apparent* design. If

anyone doesn't agree that this amount of complex design cries out for an explanation, I give up. . . Our world is dominated by [1] feats of engineering and [2] works of art. We are entirely accustomed to the idea that complex elegance is an indicator of premeditated, crafted design. This is probably the most powerful reason for the belief, held by the vast majority of people that have ever lived, in some kind of supernatural deity³⁷

This passage is rich with insights regarding natural revelation. First, it is important to underline that Dawkins is not a Christian or Trinitarian, and yet the “complex elegance” in nature creates a serious “problem” for him, since it could be seen as “an indicator of premeditated, crafted design.” As well, he notes that this experience of nature is not limited to Christians alone, because it extends to “the vast majority of people that have ever lived.” And remarkably similar to the clause “the heavens declare” in Psalm 19, Dawkins acknowledges that “complex design *cries out* for an explanation.” In fact, he “give[s] up” if other people are not impacted by nature.

Second, Dawkins offers a welcomed corrective to the discussion by reminding us that intelligent design is not limited to just complexity, which characterizes so-called ID Theory. Instead, he recognizes “elegance” in nature and includes beauty as a significant indicator of design, resulting in a healthy balance between the artistic and engineered aspects of the creation, similar to that seen in Wisdom 13. Finally, Dawkins is correct in identifying the level of certitude regarding natural revelation. Design is ultimately a “belief,” and not a proof. In particular, “complex design” is a “powerful reason” or argument held by most people for the belief in “some kind of supernatural deity.”

Of course, Dawkins dismisses natural revelation and intelligent design as being merely “apparent.” In other words, design is only an illusion or delusion.³⁸ Dawkins argues, “It is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism [atheist evolution], and find it hard to believe.”³⁹ But his argument can be recast within the context of traditional natural theology. “It is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed *by God* to *understand atheistic evolution*, and find it hard to believe.” Stated another way, the Creator has gifted humans with brains that are sensitive to the incalculable reflections of design in nature, making His existence and some of His attributes “plain to them” and “clearly seen,” as Romans 1 states. And God has given us the freedom to dismiss intelligent design and believe that it is merely an appearance and delusion.

Charles Darwin: The Overwhelming Force of the Wondrous Universe

Charles Darwin is the father of the theory of biological evolution. In the late 1830s he rejected his boyhood Christian faith, and during the final years of his life he became for the most part an agnostic.⁴⁰ Yet Darwin wrestled mightily with the issue of intelligent design throughout his entire career. For example, in a section dealing with religion from his 1876 *Autobiography*, he argues,

Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the *reason* and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather *impossibility* of conceiving this immense and wondrous universe, including man with his capacity of looking backwards and far into futurity, as a result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.⁴¹

Here is another example of a non-Christian/Trinitarian being impacted by the “wondrous universe.” The power of nature “compelled” Darwin to believe that there existed a rational God and that it was an “impossibility” to consider a world without Him. Yet he rebuts this design argument claiming, “But then arises the horrid doubt—can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions?”⁴² Consequently, Darwin concludes, “I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.”⁴³

Another example of the impact of nature upon Darwin occurred during the last year of his life when the Duke of Argyll challenged him with regard to intelligent design. Pointing to “the wonderful contrivances for certain purposes in nature” that Darwin had described in his books, the Duke recalls,

I said it was impossible to look at these without seeing that they were the effect and the expression of mind. I shall never forget Mr. Darwin’s answer. He looked at me very hard and said, ‘Well, that often comes over me with *overwhelming force*; but at other times,’ and he shook his head vaguely, adding, ‘it seems to go away.’”⁴⁴

Obviously, for an agnostic like Charles Darwin, nature is not “inactive and passive” as suggested by McGrath. It struck him with “overwhelming force”! Moreover, nature is not “shadowy, opaque, and ambiguous” and just “noise” to use McGrath’s words again. Darwin understood completely the message in nature. Similar to the passage from the *Autobiography*, it is “impossible” not to see that nature is “the effect and the expression of mind.” Yet Darwin sheepishly confesses that the experience of design “seems to go away.” But does it? Or is it because God has given humans the freedom whether or not to pursue the significant consequences of the reality of design?⁴⁵

Antony Flew: The Only Satisfying Explanation

Throughout most of his famed career, philosopher of religion and staunch atheist Antony Flew claimed that it was more reasonable to begin with the assumption of atheism until evidence for the existence of God appeared. And indeed evidence appeared with the explosion of molecular biology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (2007), Flew writes,

Biologists' investigation of DNA has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved. . . . The only satisfying explanation for the origin of such 'end-directed, self-replicating' life as we see it on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind.⁴⁶

Once again, this is indisputable evidence that it does not require Christian and Trinitarian presuppositions for the revelation in nature to be understood, as claimed by Torrance and McGrath. And to refute Barth, molecular biology was "a point of contact" between Flew and God. Moreover, Flew was quick to qualify that his belief was in the God of deism, an impersonal divine being that takes no interest in humans. In this way, he affirms the limitations of natural revelation. It only points to "an infinitely intelligent Mind," but does not reveal Him fully. This other revelation is found in Scripture. As *The Belgic Confession* affirms, God "makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word."

This section opened with Dawkins claiming that "complex design cries out for an explanation," and it closes with Flew stating that belief in a Creator is "the only satisfying explanation." The fact that non-Christians/Trinitarians like atheist Richard Dawkins, agnostic Charles Darwin, and atheistic-come-deist Antony Flew have been powerfully impacted by design in nature demonstrates the reality and power of natural revelation. In considering the force of molecular biology upon Flew, the rhetorical question in Wisdom 13:9 can be recast for our generation. "For if *modern scientists* have the power to know so much that they *can open and investigate the cell*, how do they fail to find sooner the Lord of *DNA*?" The answer I believe is simple—sin. Even though "the heavens declare the glory of God," the Lord has given humans the freedom to dismiss His clear revelation inscribed on nature.

Toward a Biblical Model of Intelligent Design

Valuable insights can be drawn from concepts presented through this paper in order to propose a model of intelligent design from a biblical perspective. The purpose of a model is to include as many interpretations as possible, including those which reject design or deem it as noise. In this way, there is no single interpretation of design, but many interpretations, including numerous Christian design positions.

The proposed model of intelligent design is rooted in one of the most important passages in Scripture, the great chapter on faith in Hebrews 11. The opening verses state,

¹Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see . . . ³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

This passage rejects that anyone can *prove* the world was created by God. Only through a step of faith does one come to the *belief* in a Creator. Yet this is not to say that faith is irrational, because this passage affirms that faith has a rational component by including the terms referring to intelligibility: “sure,” “certain,” and “understand.” Therefore, by using scientific evidence from nature, such as the amazing fine-tuning of natural laws, a reasonable *argument* can be formulated to support a belief in a Fine-Tuner. One might be “sure” and “certain” that this evidence affirms “the universe was formed at God’s command,” but in the final analysis, the acceptance of a Creator is a belief that comes through an act of faith.

In light of Hebrews 11, this model of design embraces an interpenetrative relationship between science and religion as depicted in **Figure 1**. Interpenetration recognizes reciprocal steps of faith—one from science to religion, and the other from religion to science. Regarding intelligent design, science offers physical evidence to support the belief in design, while religion provides the belief to expect reflections of design in nature. Thus there is no need to set up a false dichotomy between evidentialism and presuppositionalism.⁴⁷ Interpenetration between science and religion offers both an argument *from* design and an argument *to* design, respectively. Though I appreciate the latter and embrace it to a certain extent, historically the issue of design has been cast most often as arguing for the existence of God from design.⁴⁸ Psalm 19, Romans 1, and Wisdom 13 fit best within a context of an argument from design.

Figure 1.
Interpenetrative Model
of Science & Religion



The most controversial aspect of the suggested design model is the inclusion of the impact of sin as a critical component. Romans 1:20 and Wisdom 13:8 unambiguously refer to human accountability regarding the divine revelation in nature. Men and women are deemed “without excuse” should they refuse to listen to the “voice” in creation. In Romans 1 and Wisdom 13, the breaking of the First Commandment leads to idolatry and the transgression of the Second Commandment. I am thoroughly

unapologetic for believing in the reality of sin and its dysfunctional effect upon the human mind. In my opinion, models of intelligent design that do not include the impact of sin as a factor cannot judiciously be called “Christian.”

The proposed design model features two intersecting parameters. The ontological parameter of design deals with the nature of design. This parameter asks the question, What exactly *is* design? The epistemological parameter of design relates to the human ability to know design. This parameter asks, How *certain* is the knowledge of design? In order to understand the relationship between these two parameters, picture the intersection of a horizontal bar (ontological) and a vertical bar (epistemological). These two bars can be moved about in an infinite number of ways, resulting in an incalculable number of interpretations of design as seen in **Figures 1-5**.

The ontological parameter focusses on the nature of design—its (1) character, (2) gradient, and (3) integrity. First, design includes both artistic and engineered characteristics which manifest across the parameter. At one end, design entails the breath-taking beauty and harmony that adorns the world. Like a splendid painting or moving musical piece, nature reflects the esthetic genius of a Cosmic Artist. At the other end of the ontological parameter, the complexity, functionality, and deep mathematical rationality within the cosmos point to the mind of a Supreme Engineer. Second, the artistic and engineered characteristics in the world are expressed across a gradient that ranges from optimal to none. The design gradient accounts for features in nature which are unaesthetic and dysfunctional. For example, it is difficult for most to look at a new-born infant with a cleft lip and palate. Something went horribly wrong during the embryological development of the face in the womb. But such heart-breaking examples are part of the creation. Third, the integrity of intelligent design deals with the question of whether design is real or only an illusion.

The epistemological parameter deals with the ability to know design—its (1) level of certainty, (2) relationship to sin, and (3) integrity. First, this parameter recognizes a range of certitude regarding design knowledge. At one end, artistic and engineered characteristics in nature are claimed to be *proof* for design. At the other end, these characteristics are deemed *inert* with no effect whatsoever. Different levels of certainty exist between these boundaries. Many individuals suggest that beauty, complexity, and functionality provide a legitimate *argument* for design with a level of certitude similar to the legal concept of “beyond reasonable doubt.” Others maintain these features are only *suggestive* of the existence of design, and some assert that these characteristics are simply *consistent* with belief in design. Second, intelligent design is intimately connected to the impact of sin and our relationship with God; in particular, the First and Second Commandments. I contend that this factor often plays a determinative role in the rejection of design. Third, the integrity of design knowledge examines whether or not this knowledge is trustworthy.

Changing the intersection between the two design parameters produces various interpretations of intelligent design. For example, **Figure 2** depicts the view of design held by Intelligent Design Theorists. They accept the reality of design (as indicated by the solid line on the ontological parameter), but focus solely on the engineered machine-like features of the cell like the flagellum, disregarding completely the artistic aspects of nature (therefore the intersection on the ontological parameter is at the extreme right).⁴⁹ ID Theorists claim that design is scientifically detectable. If this were the case it would mean that design can be proven, like any other scientific fact (thus the solid line on the epistemological parameter and its intersection at the very top). And since design is purportedly scientific, human sin plays no part whatsoever in ID Theory. But from my perspective, this view of design is not Christian. It disregards both the element of faith necessary to believe in design (Heb 11:1, 3) and the impact of sin that is operative in assessing design (Rom 1:20, Wis 13:8).

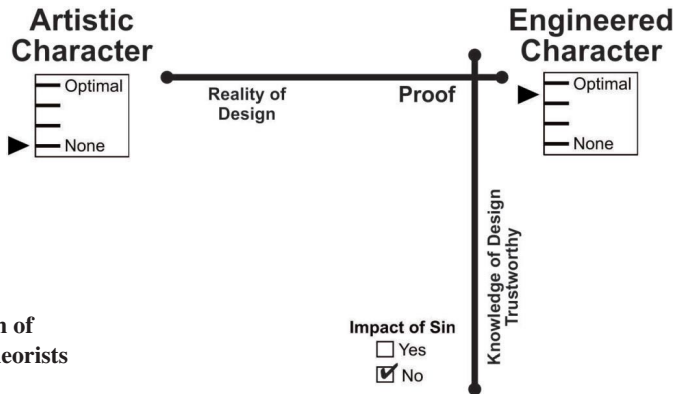


Figure 2.
Design Interpretation of
Intelligent Design Theorists

Figure 3 presents the design interpretation of Richard Dawkins. He dismisses the reality of design and claims it is merely an illusion (as indicated by the broken line on the ontological parameter). Despite this denial, Dawkins acknowledges “complex elegance” and affirms both the artistic and engineered characteristics of design, placing them in a balanced relationship (therefore the intersection in the middle of the ontological parameter). In stating that “[i]t is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism, and find it hard to believe,” Dawkins is by implication suggesting that for the most part the human mind does not have the ability to offer trustworthy knowledge about design (thus the broken line in the epistemological parameter). Of course, like many modern atheists who see themselves as special thinkers, Dawkins transcends the plight of most humans. However, nature strikes him with great force. As Dawkins states, “If anyone doesn’t agree that this amount of complex design cries out for an explanation, I give up.”⁵⁰ Consequently, nature is not inert, or simply consistent with intelligence, or merely

suggestive. For Dawkins the certitude of design is similar to a strong argument, since it “is probably the most powerful *reason* for the belief . . . in some kind of supernatural deity”⁵¹ (therefore the intersection is at the level of an argument on the epistemological parameter). And of course, this famed atheist vehemently rejects the Christian belief in sin. Yet unwittingly, Dawkins’ experience with nature affirms many features of the biblical understanding of design. The creation is active in offering a divine revelation that is intelligible, incessant, and universal. It is even dismissible. Yet Scripture also states that we are all accountable, including Dawkins, with regard to this non-verbal revelation in nature.

Figure 3.
Design Interpretation
of Richard Dawkins

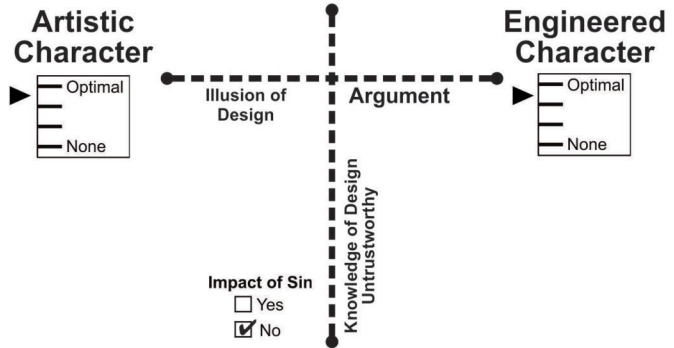


Figure 4.
Design Interpretation
of Alister McGrath

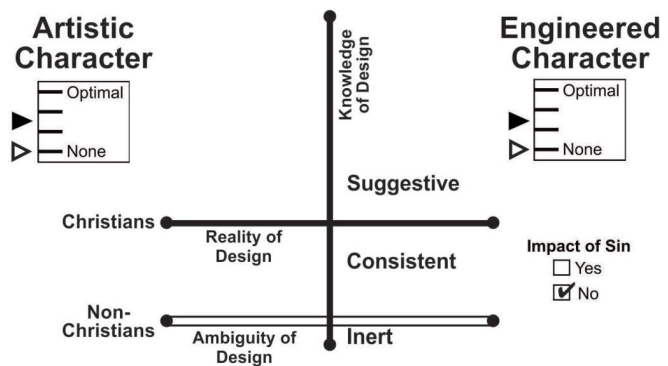


Figure 4 depicts the dichotomous understanding of design embraced by Alister McGrath. In his two central books on natural theology, *The Open Secret* (2008) and *A Finely-Tuned Universe* (2009), he recognizes beauty and fine-tuning in nature as indicators of design, *but perceived only by Christians* (thus the solid line and

intersection in the middle of the ontological parameter for Christians). According to McGrath, the physical world offers a natural revelation to Christians that is only “consistent” or at best “suggestive” of an Intelligent Designer (as indicated by the intersection between these two levels of epistemological certitude). In this way, both gradients of design would be midrange (black triangles). In contrast, for non-Christians nature is “shadowy, opaque, and ambiguous” and only emits “noise” (as indicated by open line in ontological parameter with the intersection at the inert epistemological level). Similarly, both design gradients are near the bottom (open triangles). It is truly remarkable that the impact of sin plays no part in McGrath’s natural theology. There is no mention of the “without excuse” clause in Romans 1:20 or that in Wisdom 13:8. Other than a few couple superficial uses of Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:19, McGrath presents a view of natural theology as if the classical passages dealing with natural revelation— Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:18-23, and Wisdom 13:1-9—never existed. I deem McGrath’s view of design as un-biblical.

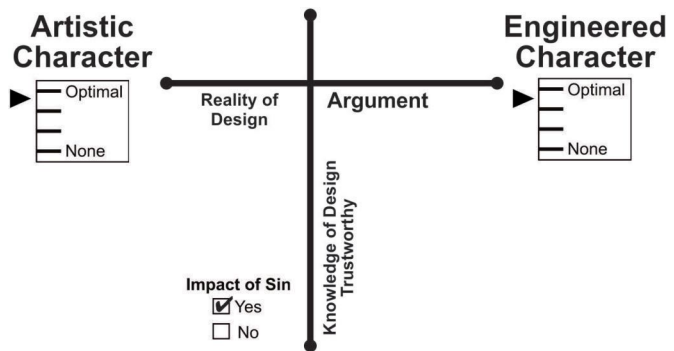


Figure 5.
My Interpretation of
Intelligent Design

Figure 5 presents my interpretation of intelligent design. I believe that design in nature is real and that God has gifted the human mind with an ability to discern trustworthy knowledge of design. Over time I have found a greater appreciation for the beauty in nature, and thus my ontological parameter of design has shifted further toward the artistic end. I perceive the artistic and engineered gradients as high, but not optimal. The natural world includes elements that are not at all esthetic, like disfiguring facial skin cancers. At times living organisms do not functional properly, as in the case of biochemical diseases. I suspect that God created the world this way because it offers us an environment with genuine freedom. Perfect optimization would be coercive, eliminating the need for faith. In other words, if everything in nature was optimally beautiful and functional, it would in effect be like a proof for intelligent design. And if some want to focus on the unsightly and inoperative aspects of nature in an attempt to justify their unbelief, the Creator has given them the freedom to do so. But from my perspective, the beauty, complexity, and functionality in nature far outweigh the occasions of ugliness and dysfunction.

Final Thoughts on Intelligent Design

An aspect of intelligent design that I find astonishing is that as science advances, greater manifestations of beauty, complexity, and functionality are discovered. Take for example Christians in earlier generations who believed in geocentricity or the 3-tier universe. Is there any doubt that when looking through the Hubble telescope today, we have an appreciation of the heavens that is incalculably more magnificent and God-glorifying? If intelligent design were merely an antiquated notion, like these ancient understandings of the structure of the cosmos, scientific discoveries would have dismissed it long ago just as it did with these ancient astronomies. But history demonstrates that as scientists probe deeper into the Book of Nature, an esthetic genius and mechanical rationality become more and more obvious. And in a subtle way this non-verbal revelation in nature beacons the Book of Scripture and a fuller disclosure of the Intelligent Designer.

To be sure, intelligent design is controversial. The reason is that everyone knows where design logically leads. If design is real, it points to the existence of a Creator. And if there is a Creator, it reasonably follows that He is Lord over the entire universe and all our lives. Intelligent design thrusts men and women at the feet of their Maker and calls them to accountability. Design forces us to deal with the First Commandment and it puts us in our proper place within the creation—we are the creatures and God is the Creator. And yes, the implications of design are deeply personal. For some the “voice” in nature calls for profound lifestyle changes. I will go so far as to say that on Judgment Day anyone standing before God claiming not to have found any evidence for His existence may well receive a review of the innumerable times that the creation “declared the glory of God” and even struck them “with overwhelming force.” And yes, they will be judged as being “without excuse.”

1 Bruce A. Demarest contrasts “special revelation” with “general revelation,” defining the latter as being “mediated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, [and] traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God’s existence and character.” *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 14.

2 My italics. *The Belgic Confession* (1985 version) accessed 19 Jun 2014.

http://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/Belgic%20Confession_old.pdf. I have made one modification to the text changing “he makes himself known to us more openly by . . .” to “he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by . . .” in order to better translate the original French “Il se donne à connaître à nous plus manifestement et évidemment par . . .” Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), III:384.

3 Regrettably, in the last twenty years the term “intelligent design” has been co-opted and muddled by the so-called “Intelligent Design Movement.” Claiming to detect design *scientifically*, ID Theory is a narrow view of design connected to miraculous interventions in the origin of life. In other words, it is a god-of-the-gaps model. Therefore, ID Theory should be termed “*Interventionistic Design Theory*.” See Michael J. Behe, “Design vs. Randomness in Evolution: Where Do the Data Point?” *Canadian Catholic Review* 17:3 (July 1999), 63-66;

- Denis O. Lamoureux, "A Box or a Black Hole? A Response to Michael J. Behe." *Ibid.*, 67-73; Phillip E. Johnson and Denis O. Lamoureux, *Darwinism Defeated? The Johnson-Lamoureux Debate on Biological Origins* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Press, 1999).
- 4 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds. 13 vols. (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1957), II/2: 191-192. My italics. In his famed 1934 debate with Barth over natural theology, Brunner bluntly notes that Barth had a "one-sided concept of revelation" and "a queer kind of loyalty to Scripture to demand that such a revelation [i.e., natural revelation] should not be acknowledged [from passages such as Rom 1:19-20, 2:14-15], in order that the significance of biblical revelation should not be minimized." Emil Brunner, "Natural Theology and Grace" in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 25, 48.
- 5 Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner" in *Natural Theology*, 71, 107, 121. In contrast, Brunner firmly embraced "a point of contact": "Natural Theology and Grace," 21, 32-33, 56.
- 6 *Church Dogmatics*, I/1: 273.
- 7 *Ibid.*, II/1: 173.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 84. Holder correctly contends that "Barth's approach leads ultimately to an irrationalism which deprives Christians of an important means of commending faith in a pluralist society." Rodney Holder, "Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology" *Themelios* 26:3 (2001), 22. Or as Barr notes, "Barth's rejection of natural theology was never really based on biblical exegesis . . . At times Barth seemed to treat biblical scholarship with mere contempt, and brushed it aside: he could do better himself[!]." James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1993), 103, 118.
- 9 Or as Torrance terms it, "the demonic natural theology of the Nazis." Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Natural Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1980), 89.
- 10 *Church Dogmatics*, II/1: 173.
- 11 Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, Thomas Williams, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 99.
- 12 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Transformation of Natural Theology" in *Ground and Grammar*, 75-109. For his explanation of "scientific theology," in his *Theological Science* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969), 106-140.
- 13 Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," in Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 13 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), IV: 326. See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1995), 6, 49, 76-77.
- 14 *Ground and Grammar*, 89.
- 15 Thomas F. Torrance. "The Christian Doctrine of Revelation" Lecture Auburn Theological Seminary (1938-1939), 11. Quote in Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999), 188.
- 16 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth" *Religious Studies* 6:2 (1970), 125, 128.
- 17 Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 131.
- 18 "Revelation," 32; *Torrance*, 188. My italics.
- 19 I am befuddled as to why Torrance and McGrath repeatedly emphasize that their natural theology is Trinitarian. For example, the first half of McGrath's *A Fine-Tuned Universe* is entitled "A Trinitarian Natural Theology." But other than incessant proclamations of his natural theology being Trinitarian, very little integration appears. The same can be said regarding John Polkinghorne's "Trinitarian perspective" of science and theology. This all strikes me as being merely fashionable Christian rhetoric. See Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 9-108; John Polkinghorne, "Physics and Metaphysics in a Trinitarian Perspective" *Theology and Science* 1:1 (2003), 33-49.
- 20 Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 2, 136.

- 21 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 16-17, 125. My italics.
- The theme of consonance and resonance appears throughout McGrath's *Open Secret*. *Ibid.*, 17, 77, 79, 222, 233, 234, 270.
- 25 *Fine-Tuned Universe*, xii-xiii.
- 26 *Open Secret*, 17, 18. My italics.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 139. My italics.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 184. My italics. This theme that nature does not reveal God outside of Christian faith runs through McGrath's central book on natural theology. For example, "though the natural world is open to public gaze, its proper interpretation is hidden . . . Nature is not merely neutral; it is ambiguous. It may be silent or may even actively conceal the divine . . . nature itself cannot be said to mandate or authorize any specific reading." *Ibid.*, 76, 116, 125.
- 30 Other passages supportive of intelligent design include Prov 8:22-31; Job 38-41; Ps 8, 93, 104, 139:13-14 and 148; and Acts 17:22-31. See also Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 19-38, 81-101.
- 31 *Open Secret*, 136.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 173, 184.
- 33 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1951), 876.
- 34 Regarding ancient science in Scripture, see Paul H. Seely, *Inerrant Wisdom* (Portland, OR: Evangelical Reformed, 1989); Denis O. Lamoureux, "Lessons from the Heavens" *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith* 60:1 (2008), 4-15; *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 105-176.
- 35 Another misguided aspect of Barth's view of natural revelation is that he rejects the notion of any "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) between the Creator and His creation, such as that clearly presented in Wisdom 13. That is, he dismisses any similarity between that which is created and God the uncreated being. According to Barth, "I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of the Antichrist." *Church Dogmatics*, I/1: xiii.
- 36 To make it very clear, I am not judging Dawkins' eternal destiny. Only God can do that. I am merely asking academic questions regarding why Dawkins holds the views he does.
- 37 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1986]), Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, xiii, xvi. My italics.
- 38 See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 2, 156-157.
- 39 *Ibid.* xv. My italics.
- 40 See Denis O. Lamoureux, "Darwinian Theological Insights: Toward an Intellectually Fulfilled Christian Theism. Part I: Divine and Intelligent Design" *Perspectives in Science and Christian Faith* 64:2 (June 2012), 108-119; "Part II: Evolutionary Theodicy and Evolutionary Psychology" 64:3 (Sept 2012), 166-178.
- 41 Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882*. Nora Barlow, ed. (London: Collins, 1958), 92-93. My italics.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 93. The problem with Darwin's rebuttal is quite obvious. What has he just done to make his argument? He trusted his mind developed from the lowest animal! In other words, his argument is circular; more specifically, it suffers from self-referential incoherence. Alvin Plantinga recognizes this problem in *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216-237.
- 43 *Autobiography of Darwin*, 94.
- 44 Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1887), I:316. My italics.

45 Again I am not judging the eternal destiny of anyone. I am only asking academic questions in the light of the Bible's view of natural revelation.

46 Antony Flew, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, with Roy Abraham Varghese (NY: HarperOne, 2007), 123, 132.

47 See Ronald B. Mayers, *Both/And: A Balanced Apologetic* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984).

48 One of the best examples of the argument *to* design comes from John Henry Newman. "I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design." C. Dessain, ed. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, 31 vols (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2006), XXV:97.

49 For example, Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1996), 39, 69-72.

50 Dawkins, *Blind Watchmaker*, xiii.

51 *Ibid.*, xvi. My italics.