

Medieval Philosophies Become Modern Learning Science:

Learning is more than performative action.

Nicolette C. Nance

CognitionLab

Research Paper No. 01 ·◆· 2026

Abstract

Learning is science—studied through biblical truths—and systematically organized according to spiritual laws that guide human beings through the accumulative process of virtue and knowledge, allowing for transformation through God’s love. Medieval theorists examined this transformative love, explained its role in active learning, and concluded that God’s love evidenced learned wisdom. Learning was not performative action; it was the disciplined pursuit of wisdom, requiring the training of the mind through imagination and moral development. This paper examines medieval philosophical theories as they pertain to learning and education and bridges the gap between medieval concepts and modern expectations. It further evaluates gaps in contemporary curriculum and argues that the removal of imagination, wisdom, and spiritual structure has weakened the formation of the whole person.

Keywords: Medieval Philosophy · Learning science · Imagination · Wisdom · Curriculum reform · Imago Dei · Education · Cognitive Formation

Suggested Citation

Nance, N. (2026). Medieval philosophies become modern learning science: Learning is more than performative action. *CognitionLab*.

Learning was once more than performative action – its potency diminished when divinity was removed from education. Medieval philosophers studied learning, explaining its parts rooted in Christian truths, clarifying that education was learning and learning was the lifelong pursuit of wisdom. To attain wisdom is to discipline the mind, and according to medieval theorists like Christine de Pisan, Aquinas, and Augustine, only the imaginative mind can be disciplined. Imagination and wisdom once had different phenomenological connotations, but both were interconnected with learning and spiritual growth – imagination reflected “intellectual ability,” and wisdom determined a human being’s capacity for empathy and discernment. Flash forward to the contemporary educational culture, and both terms have been divorced from their medieval philosophical roots – arguably actions that developed recent generations of depressed students. Contemporary education has largely prioritized developing a learning culture that promotes the subjective body that focuses on career readiness over the formation of the whole person, leaving students alone in an increasingly secularized culture. Because imagination and wisdom acquisition are essential to the development of personhood, contemporary educators must reintroduce classical pedagogy to restore principles inherent in the human soul as bearer of the *Imago Dei* (Brown, 2014).

Summary and Context

Genesis 1:26-27 introduced God’s principle wish that human beings recognize their unique creation, fit to exercise dignity, humility, and a posture of purpose according to His plan (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). Human beings were to love each other as God loved them, and to live in the “Image of God,” or *Imago Dei*, in the physical world (Brown, 2014). Medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, drew upon Augustine’s exploration of the “Trinitarian elements... existence, life, and reason; and memory, intellect, and will” combined with Aristotle and Pseudo-Dionysius’ discourse to explicate human being’s predisposition to *Imago Dei*, explaining that humans were separated from beasts because of their “rational soul” (Brown, 2014, p. 1). The “rational soul,” human intelligence working in tandem with free will, allowed the human mind to conceive the importance of imagination and its counterpart, wisdom. Aquinas explored the relationship between the two copartners and explained that imaginative development tempered the mind so that sin could not be obscured by human vulnerabilities (Roszak & Berry, 2021).

Aquinas distinguished himself from Aristotle’s influence, criticizing the ancient philosopher for his lack of three-dimensional understanding of imagination (Roszak & Berry, 2021). Aquinas accepted Aristotle’s “art imitates nature,” but he felt that imagination was as abstract as art and therefore could not be limited to “direct imagination[’s]” linearity (Roszak & Berry, 2021, p. 3). Aquinas indicated that cognitive powers allowed the human mind to experience supernatural elements offered by God – elements that transcended the body and invited the mind to develop virtues that guided knowledge. It was a rigorous process that yielded divine wisdom, but it was not a perfect wisdom that was learned. Aquinas echoed Augustine that human beings were made in the “imperfect likeness” of God (Brown, 2014, p. 1). This “disunity” inherent in human formation mirrored an equally disharmonious intellectual soul. Contrary to its negative connotation, Christians willingly embraced the discord allowing that souls, not intelligence, encompassed this “imperfect likeness” of God (Brown, 2014, p. 3). Aquinas specified that human personhood developed similarly in their “dissimilarities,” further solidifying the idea that “direct imagination” is not reflective of the intricate effects sin has on human development (Roszak & Berry, 2021, p. 3).

An “imperfect likeness” of God permitted “imaginative art” – Aquinas’ idea that explored the depths of human imagination as it worked out biblical truths that revealed God’s love and wisdom (Brown, 2014; Roszak & Berry, 2021). Just as medieval philosopher, Christine de Pisan drew connections between virtues and God’s wisdom, Aquinas explained that imagination invites a nuanced response to nature, which in turn develops distinct types of virtue. For example, Roszak and Berry (2021) point out that moral virtue derived from imaginative impulses can be understood as “discernment, expression, investigation, creativity, and skill” (p. 5). These virtues would not normally be listed under the umbrella of virtue; however, Davis (2020) used the metaphor of the snake to indicate shrewdness (p. 5). One interpretation might position the snake as the harbinger of “evil,” but the context might dictate an interpretation suggesting the snake reveals “prudence” (p. 5).

It was this divergence of interpretation, coupled with a society that encouraged pursuits for wisdom, that unified conversations surrounding medieval philosophies of education. Augustine explained that God provided the meaning in language and human expression (Rist, 1994b). This spoke to abstract imaginative art that became spiritually subjective,

indicative of a human being's personal relationship with God, and yet, Christians understood language and symbols were a circular unified system created by God, used by God, to teach Christians that regardless of personal perceptions, they were always to be drawn back to His love, regardless of the dissimilarities society found in each other (Rist, 1994b). It was always a harmonious, biblically grounded pursuit for wisdom.

Overtime interpretive complexity within language and conversation became muddled, discouraging any development of "imaginative art." Imaginative art lost its power when God's love and wisdom was rejected, hence, the ability to communicate became ineffective bearing witness to the absence of ancient wisdom and compassion. Similar to Kierkegaard rejecting the notion that non-Christians could witness miracles, Augustine noted "that 'the word which sounds without is a sign of the word which shines within,'" concurring with Kierkegaard that only Christians could hear the purity of God's word and experience His inner light that enflamed the human soul (Smith, 2020). Once God was removed from the focus of education, language and signs lost their meaning. Also, like Kierkegaard, since language and signs no longer had meaning, scripture no longer bared theological potency (Smith, 2020). Of course, language still existed; however, its existence, much like imagination, compassion, and empathy, had been commonized - losing its ability to transcend the human mind (Rist, 1994b).

Critical Analysis

Contemporary education in a sense adopted the Augustinian position that God's purpose for humankind should be questioned (Rist, 1994a). The power of scripture no longer chronologizes human creation and it does not prophesize the future as outlined in Revelations (Rist, 1994a). The term "wisdom" is secularized, as is "knowledge," stunting spiritual internal warfare that motivates personal relationships with God. Education is static. Learning institutions are no longer "wisdom's special workshop" and universities frame wisdom as "emotional intelligence," devoid of any spiritually moral foundational context (Davis, 2020, p. 1). Instead of developing the whole person, institutions encourage the development of individualism. Learning institutions have abandoned holistic missions that minister to the whole person.

Wisdom was historically transferred from generation to generation through storytelling, whether it be in ancient literature or actual storytelling as a form of entertainment and as education of social mores. Either way, greater attention needs to be paid to ancient wisdom recorded in older texts, and instructors need to explain that ancient wisdom examines the importance of diversity. Davis (2020) explains that imaginative art needs to take form, and that can be as a story, tangible concrete art, conceptual form through memorization and internal meaning making. These practices enrich the soul, resurrecting time-tested practices that arouse the desire for learning. She suggests that aspects of medieval educational approaches be revitalized in learning institutions, citing memorization and recitation as effective introductions to internalizing meaning making.

Davis (2020) frames the modern egotistical crisis experienced in contemporary student culture against Socrates's admission that "he is the wisest man alive because he knows that he knows nothing" (p.7). His admission competes with the rampant contemporary malady - laziness of the mind - preventing students from studying "teachings of the learned" (p. 7). Płóciennik (2013) publishes an entire article that cites the importance of *Teaching for Wisdom*, admitting that wisdom, a personality trait in her estimation, is a cognitive response to learning, however it is a result of parental influence and correct instruction. She explains that the educational system's opposition to teaching wisdom in classrooms is due to its conceptual complexities and abstraction- its pedagogical approach is indeterminable. It is this lazy mindedness that has diluted learning and contemporary education. Words no longer have power. They have become common and where once the words "wisdom" and "imagination" stirred the soul, they are now absorbed into contemporary culture that ascribes everything and everyone to a collective dissident mob controlled by defeatists and radicals.

Conclusion

Learning is a disciplined science. As such, approaches to instruction need to be studied and researched because learning is not simply the accumulation of information. Learning is the quiet and patient work of training the mind to seek truth, to seek God, despite the disintegration of classical educational principles. Educators need to inspire in their students

aspirations for intellectual intelligence. If they can, it is a first step to opening the collective mind to biblical truths and overturning secular influences.

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