

Phillis Wheatley on Learning, Virtue, and the Moral Purpose of Education

A Companion Brief from Truth & Transformation USA

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Phillis Wheatley occupies a remarkable place in the intellectual and cultural landscape of the early American world. Enslaved as a young girl and brought from West Africa to Boston in 1761, Wheatley received an education within the household of John and Susanna Wheatley that quickly revealed her extraordinary intellectual gifts. By her teenage years she had mastered English, studied classical literature and Scripture, and begun composing poetry that engaged deeply with themes of faith, morality, and human dignity.

Her 1773 volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, established her as one of the first published African American authors and one of the most widely recognized

poets of the late eighteenth century. Yet Wheatley's work was not merely literary. Throughout her poems and letters she consistently connected learning with moral responsibility, portraying education as a means by which the human mind is awakened to virtue, reverence, and the providential order of creation.

Learning and the Responsibility of the Mind

One of Wheatley's most direct reflections on education appears in her poem "*To the University of Cambridge, in New England.*" Addressing students at Harvard, Wheatley reminds them that intellectual opportunity carries spiritual and moral obligations. She warns that learning without virtue can lead to pride and moral failure, urging students instead to pursue wisdom shaped by humility and Christian faith.

In the poem she writes:

*"Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard."
(Wheatley, 1773, "To the University of Cambridge, in New England").*

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The admonition reflects a broader conviction common among many thinkers of the founding era: education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the cultivation of moral judgment. Wheatley presents learning as a gift that must be ordered toward virtue, reminding her audience that intellectual privilege carries ethical responsibility.

Her published poems revealed a command of language, theology, and moral reasoning that surprised many readers of her time and challenged prevailing assumptions about the intellectual capacities of Africans. In this way, Wheatley's work functioned not only as poetry but as evidence that disciplined learning could cultivate moral reflection, rhetorical skill, and intellectual participation in the broader cultural life of the emerging republic (Wheatley, 1773).

Before the publication of her poems in 1773, a group of prominent Boston figures examined Wheatley to confirm that she had indeed written the work herself, an event that underscores both the skepticism she faced and the intellectual rigor she demonstrated.

Education and the Recognition of Human Dignity

Wheatley's writings also reveal how education could illuminate the dignity of the human person. Her famous poem "*On Being Brought from Africa to America*" reflects on the spiritual transformation she associated with Christian instruction while simultaneously challenging readers who denied the intellectual or moral capacity of Africans. In one of the poem's most frequently quoted lines she reminds her audience:

*"Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train."
(Wheatley, 1773, "On Being Brought from Africa to America").*

In this brief passage Wheatley confronts prevailing racial assumptions by affirming that spiritual and intellectual formation are not limited by ethnicity or social status. The capacity for learning, virtue, and redemption belongs to all who bear the image of God.

Her poetry therefore carries an implicit educational argument: instruction in faith and knowledge reveals the shared moral nature of humanity.

Learning in Service of Faith and Providence

Many of Wheatley's poems explore the relationship between knowledge and divine order. In "*Thoughts on the Works of Providence*," she reflects on the beauty and complexity of creation, presenting the natural world as a source of wonder that directs the mind toward its Creator. As she writes,

*"'Tis thine to look through nature up to nature's God."
(Wheatley, 1773, "Thoughts on the Works of Providence").*

Such reflections echo a long Christian tradition in which education begins with attentiveness to the order of creation and culminates in reverence for God.

Wheatley's work repeatedly portrays intellectual inquiry as a pathway toward spiritual understanding. Knowledge does not replace faith; rather, it deepens the capacity to recognize divine wisdom in the world.

Education and the Cause of Liberty

Wheatley also connected learning with moral responsibility in public life. In her 1774 letter to Samson Occom, a Native American minister who advocated for the rights of Indigenous peoples, she condemned the hypocrisy of those who demanded political liberty while denying freedom to others. She writes,

*"In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance"
(Wheatley, 1774).*

She then challenges the hypocrisy of those who sought liberty for themselves while denying it to others, observing that the contradiction between the cry for liberty and the exercise of oppression "does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine."

Her letter demonstrates that education in Scripture and moral reasoning could sharpen one's awareness of injustice. Wheatley's intellectual formation enabled her not only to write poetry but also to engage the ethical contradictions of her time.

A Voice of Moral Formation

Although Wheatley did not establish schools or write educational treatises, her work contributes to the broader conversation about education in the founding era. Through poetry and correspondence she reminds readers that learning must be ordered toward virtue, humility, and reverence for God. Intellectual achievement without moral formation, she suggests, risks becoming a source of pride rather than wisdom.

Wheatley also portrays learning as a disciplined pursuit of virtue. In her poem “*On Virtue*,” she describes moral excellence as something the mind must actively seek, writing, “O Thou bright jewel in my aim I strive / To comprehend thee” (Wheatley, 1773, “On Virtue”). Education, in this vision, becomes a process of striving toward moral clarity under divine guidance.

Her writings also testify to the transformative power of education itself. In a society that often denied the intellectual capacities of enslaved Africans, Wheatley’s work demonstrated that disciplined learning could illuminate both the dignity of the human person and the moral responsibilities of a free society.

Conclusion

Phillis Wheatley’s poetry offers a distinctive voice within the intellectual culture of the founding generation. By linking learning with virtue, faith, and human dignity, she presents education as a formative force that shapes both the character of individuals and the moral conscience of a society. Her work reminds us that the pursuit of knowledge carries obligations beyond intellectual achievement. Education, rightly ordered, awakens the mind to truth, deepens reverence for the Creator, and calls individuals to live in accordance with the moral responsibilities that accompany both learning and freedom.

References

Wheatley, P. (1773). *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral*. London: A. Bell. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/poemsonvarioussu00whea>

Wheatley, P. (1774, February 11). *Letter to Reverend Samson Occom*. National Constitution Center. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/phillis-wheatley-peters-letter-to-reverend-samuel-occum-february-11-1774>

Pastor & Educator Application
Key Takeaways from Phillis Wheatley

1) Education reveals the dignity of every human person

- Wheatley’s life demonstrated that intellectual capacity and moral insight are not determined by race or social status.
- For ministry framing: “Education can uncover the image of God where society has failed to recognize it.”

2) Learning must be ordered toward virtue

- In “*To the University of Cambridge, in New England*,” Wheatley warns students that knowledge without moral discipline leads to spiritual danger.
- Pastor framing: “Education forms character before it forms expertise.”

3) Intellectual inquiry should lead the mind toward God

- In “*Thoughts on the Works of Providence*,” Wheatley presents the study of creation as a pathway to reverence for the Creator.
- Educator framing: “True learning cultivates wonder and humility before God.”

4) Education sharpens moral awareness in public life

- In her 1774 letter to Samson Occom, Wheatley exposes the contradiction between the colonists’ demand for liberty and the persistence of slavery.
- Pastor framing: “Moral reasoning shaped by faith helps believers recognize injustice.”

5) Cultural expression can serve moral formation

- Wheatley used poetry to shape moral imagination and public reflection.
 - Educator framing: “Literature and the arts can teach virtue as powerfully as formal instruction.”
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Pastoral Cross-References

Scriptural Anchors for Wheatley's Educational Vision (ESV)

Human dignity and the image of God

- **Genesis 1:27**

“So God created man in his own image...”

→ Supports Wheatley's affirmation that intellectual and moral capacity belong to all people.

Learning ordered toward wisdom and virtue

- **Proverbs 1:7**

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

→ Aligns with Wheatley's insistence that learning must be grounded in reverence for God.

Creation as a pathway to knowledge of God

- **Romans 1:20**

“For his invisible attributes... have been clearly perceived... in the things that have been made.”

→ Resonates with Wheatley's reflection that one may “look through nature up to nature's God.”

Freedom and resistance to oppression

- **Galatians 5:1**

“For freedom Christ has set us free...”

→ Reflects Wheatley's argument that the love of freedom is rooted in the moral order established by God.

Wisdom guiding moral judgment

- **James 3:17**

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable...”

→ Reinforces Wheatley's understanding that learning must cultivate moral discernment.

Practical “Next-Step” Applications

Ways Pastors and Educators Can Apply Wheatley’s Insights This Week

1) Teach education as a reflection of human dignity

Encourage students to see learning as an expression of the image of God rather than merely a path to achievement or status.

2) Pair intellectual learning with moral formation

In sermons, classrooms, or small groups, connect academic subjects with questions of character, humility, and responsibility.

3) Use literature to shape moral imagination

Introduce poetry or narrative texts that invite reflection on virtue, justice, and faith—demonstrating how the arts contribute to moral formation.

4) Encourage wonder in the study of creation

Help students see science and nature study not as purely technical pursuits but as opportunities to reflect on the wisdom and beauty of God’s creation.

5) Teach moral consistency in public life

Use historical examples—such as Wheatley’s letter to Samson Occom—to discuss how Christian moral reasoning exposes contradictions between professed ideals and lived practice.
