

## **Toward a Theistic Learning Theory**

### **Abstract**

Theistic learning theory is a theory of learning based on the superiority, primacy, and worthiness of worship of God as revealed in the Bible. Built on this foundation and within this structure are the constant concepts and flexible concepts of theistic learning theory. Constant concepts are those that must remain for theistic learning theory to remain theistic learning theory. Flexible concepts are those that can be altered or replaced based on individual thoughtful consideration of existing epistemologies, pedagogies, and other learning theories. Flexible concepts must fit within the building in which theistic learning theory is housed.

### **God**

Theistic learning theory begins with God, specifically the God of the Bible. Everything else in theistic learning theory is just a subheading under God, because God created everything physical and non-physical. God's superiority and primacy are thus established by his role as the creator of all things.

God is the creator of all things both seen and unseen, both observable and unobservable. God himself points to his creation in order to demonstrate his role in the universe. "I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading the earth all alone" (NASB, 1977, Isaiah 44:24). The implications of God as creator cannot be overstated. Because God created all things he is both omniscient and sovereign: omniscient because the creator knows everything about his creation, and sovereign because everything in creation belongs to the creator. Thus, God's role as creator is the demonstration and proof of his superiority and primacy.

God's attributes enhance his superiority and primacy because they make him worthy of worship. God is infinite. He has always existed and will always exist, and his powers and abilities are without limits (1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 145:3; Hebrews 1:12). God never changes (Malachi 3:6). God is omnipresent; he is everywhere at once (Psalm 139:7-12; Jeremiah 23:23-24). God is omnipotent; he is all-powerful (Jeremiah 32:27). God is just; his actions are moral, fair and impartial (Acts 10:34-35; Romans 3:25-26). God is love; he is self-sacrificing for mankind's benefit (Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 2:4-5; 1 John 4:7-10). God is grace; he shows kindness toward and gives gifts to the undeserving (Exodus 34:6; Titus 2:11). And, God is truth; he is always reliable and legitimate (Exodus 34:6; 2 Samuel 7:28).

God's superiority and primacy as demonstrated through creation, and God's attributes, which lead naturally to his worship, provide not just the foundation and starting point for theistic learning theory but also the building in which it is housed. Placed within this building and on this firm foundation are the concepts of theistic learning theory. The first concept is the nature of students, which is a constant concept within theistic learning theory. A constant concept is one that is so closely coupled with the foundation of theistic learning theory that it must persist for the theory to remain sound. A constant concept cannot be removed from theistic learning theory without fundamentally altering the theory. In contrast to constant concepts are flexible concepts that may be altered or replaced based on thoughtful consideration of existing epistemologies,

pedagogies, and other learning theories. Flexible concepts, however, must fit within the building in which theistic learning theory is housed.

### *The Nature of Students; A Constant Concept*

Teachers are students: master students yes, but students none-the-less. The difference between teachers and students is that teachers have found someone to pay them to learn, while students, at least in the college setting, must pay someone to allow the student the opportunity to learn.

God created students in his image to serve his purpose and gave them a free will to choose their paths in life (Genesis 1:26). Students choose to rebel against God, which is called sin, and this rebellion separates students from a personal relationship with God because God is holy and just. God's holiness separates rebellious students from him (Isaiah 59:2), and God's justice punishes rebellion by death and eternal separation from himself (Romans 6:23). But God, through his love and by his grace, provided a gift, a payment in place of the student so the student can be restored to a personal relationship with God just as if the student had never rebelled (Romans 3:22-24). This gift, this payment, restores the student to a right relationship of worship and submission to God (Romans 5:1).

A student's rebellion against God is not unique to the individual student, but rather an existing state of mankind. Rebellion against God, having entered the world, is in all students. Thus it is the nature of students to rebel against God (Romans 5:12). Even after a student accepts the gift of the payment for rebellion, the student's nature of rebelling against God is at war with the student's new nature of worship and submission to God (Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:15-25).

As God's creation and as bearers of God's image students seek knowledge and wisdom, are creative and inquisitive, exercise self-control and love, seek truth and understanding, are peaceful and self-sacrificing, and exercise patience and gentleness (Galatians 5:22-25). Because of students' rebellion against God, students seek strife and confusion, are selfish and hurtful, exercise hatred and jealousy, seek immorality and pleasure, are foolish and conceited, and exercise envy and deceit (Galatians 5:19-20).

### *Flexible Concepts*

The concepts described below are the personal choices of the author based on thoughtful consideration of existing epistemologies, pedagogies, and other learning theories. As such, these choices are subject to debate and correction over time as both the author and the larger educational and psychological communities gain new insights. Furthermore, the choices of what to include and what to exclude were guided by the author's role as a teacher at the undergraduate collegiate level. Others who choose to adopt theistic learning theory in their own pedagogical practice may want to incorporate different flexible concepts based on their own thoughtful consideration of existing epistemologies, pedagogies, and other learning theories and their own teaching situation.

#### *The goal of learning.*

In the pedagogy of the author knowledge is queen, but wisdom is king. Thus the goal of learning is to produce wise students. Wisdom is the integration and application of moral,

religious, and naturalistic knowledge. Knowledge is the facts, concepts, and theories that we know. Wisdom is using those facts, concepts, and theories to successfully solve problems, build relationships, and worship and serve God.

*The biology of knowledge acquisition.*

The synapses and neuronal networks in our brains represent knowledge. “It seems that every fact we know, every idea we understand, and every action we take has the form of a network of neurons in our brain. We know of no other form” (Zull, 2002, p.99). “If [our] knowledge is to grow, the neuronal networks must physically change” (Zull, p.112). Therefore, knowledge acquisition is physical because it involves the growth and strengthening of synapses and neuronal networks in our brains.

Knowledge acquisition can occur in two forms: existing neuronal networks can be strengthened, or new neuronal networks can be grown. To strengthen a neuronal network the synapses of that network must be repeatedly used. To grow a new neuronal network there first must be an existing neuronal network to which the knowledge can be attached. New networks cannot be established apart from existing networks. Further, for a new neuronal network to grow students must work with the new knowledge through a cycle of experience, reflection, hypothesis forming and active testing (Zull, 2002).

In the cycle of knowledge acquisition the first stage called experience is sensory input. The student’s senses perceive input and the student must employ pattern recognition and selective attention (Driscoll, 2005) in order to process all of the input. The second stage called reflection, or reflective observation (Zull, 2002), is the integration of the experience with existing knowledge. During reflection students encode the current experience with previous experiences. In the third stage called hypothesis forming students formulate new understanding by combining the current experience with previous experiences. In this stage students transition from receivers of knowledge to producers of knowledge through their taking ownership of the knowledge. In the final stage called active testing students actively test their knowledge through such actions as reading, asking questions, writing, taking tests, etc. Active testing leads to new experiences thus continuing the cycle of knowledge acquisition.

*The existence of natural ability.*

Because knowledge acquisition is physical it stands to reason that students differ in their ability to acquire new knowledge. This difference is due both to the student’s prior learning and to the student’s natural ability to acquire knowledge. Natural ability is genetic and encompasses the root level of concepts such as Gardner’s multiple intelligences and learning styles. Because students differ in their natural abilities to acquire knowledge students will benefit from different methods of knowledge presentation, will acquire knowledge in different ways, will acquire knowledge at different speeds, and may prefer one discipline or type of knowledge over others. Natural ability is not a concept just describing exceptional performance in a single discipline by select students. Rather, natural ability is present in all students and explains each student’s personal innate ability to understand and acquire knowledge.

*The importance of self-efficacy and self-regulation.*

Self-efficacy is a student’s confidence in his or her own ability to accomplish a task. Self-regulation is a student’s ability to manage task completion. Both self-efficacy and self-regulation are critical to learning, although self-regulation is the more important of the two.

Self-efficacy is a mediator of performance and achievement and is largely based on a student's previous experience at similar tasks, but is also influenced by the student's observations of others achieving success at similar tasks (Driscoll, 2005). Caution should be exercised in efforts to verbally reinforce self-efficacy as positive verbal cues may have a negative effect on students with low self-efficacy (Driscoll). Low self-efficacy can be mitigated by efficient self-regulation.

Self-regulation begins with a goal and involves the student monitoring progress toward that goal and regulating his or her motivation and behavior to maximize the possibility of achieving the goal (Driscoll, 2005). Motivation is the internal engine that drives self-regulation. Even external motivators must be internalized for a student to achieve self-regulation. Behavior is driven by the student's work ethic and provides the external activity that carries out the work of self-regulation. Self-regulation also involves planning of the steps involved to move from goal setting to goal completion. Depending on the complexity of the task and the student's familiarity with the task this planning of steps can be internal or external to the student.

#### *The role of environment.*

Knowledge acquisition and learning do not occur in a vacuum. Every student is part of multiple social systems and every learning opportunity is situated in specific circumstances. The combined effect of social systems and specific circumstances form the environment in which learning occurs. Environment can often play as large as or a larger role than self-efficacy, self-regulation, and natural ability on knowledge acquisition and learning. This impact of environment on learning occurs through the demonstrated values, attitude, and behavior of peers and authority figures, immediate distractions, opportunities, consequences, etc.

#### *Conclusion*

Theistic learning theory is a theory of learning based on the superiority, primacy, and worthiness of worship of God as revealed in the Bible. Built on this foundation and within this structure are the constant concepts and flexible concepts of theistic learning theory. Constant concepts are those that must remain for theistic learning theory to remain theistic learning theory. The nature of students is currently the only articulated constant concept. Flexible concepts are those that can be altered or replaced based on individual thoughtful consideration of existing epistemologies, pedagogies, and other learning theories. Flexible concepts must fit within the building in which theistic learning theory is housed. The author of this paper identified five key flexible concepts to which he holds; the goal of learning, the biology of learning, the existence of natural ability, the importance of self-efficacy and self-regulation, and the role of environment.

## References

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