

## Acquiring Epistemological And Moral Autonomy In A Different Culture: An Educational Goal In Rwandan Secondary Schools

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article History</b></p> <p>Received: September 07, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: April 08, 2022</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords :</b> Autonomy, Epistemology, Moral Competence Based Curriculum, Tutors.</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.5281/zenodo.6426330</p>	<p><i>This qualitative study collected data from 24 Rwandan classes using a focus group interview to 24 teachers, an interview to 24 students and an observation checklist based on both a template of seven epistemological ways of knowing suggested by Van de Lagemaat Richard and Kohlberg stages of moral autonomy. The aim consisted of analyzing the effectiveness of the implementation of Competence Based Curriculum specifically in its component of developing in learners the epistemological and moral autonomy. Although the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) used in Rwandan secondary schools aims at epistemological and moral autonomy of learners, findings of this study revealed that CBC purpose of developing cognitive and moral autonomy is rooted in the Kantian rationalistic and individualistic philosophy while being implemented on students and tutors who live and believe in a different context experience a cultural paradigm of developing moral and intellectual autonomy. This challenge implies a strong predominance of the community agenda over the individual initiatives, where a cultural filter contributes to a great extent for both tutors' and learners' cognitive processing and moral decisions. In this context, heteronomy tends to prevail where the individual reasoning and decision making are dependent to a certain extent on the social, cultural, religious and political orientations.</i></p>

### Introduction

#### Educational goal of learner's epistemological and moral autonomy Autonomy in Education

Autonomy comes from the Greek words "autos" or self and "nomos" which means law. An autonomous person is a person capable of reasoning and deciding according to self-governed rules. However, it seems that the question of how such rules develop in individuals is relative to the context in they have acquired them.

The concept of autonomy extends to a variety of domains including intellectual, moral, social, cultural, psychological, physical and more becoming thus more complex than it appears in its etymology. This study limits itself to epistemological and moral autonomy of learners during the implementation of CBC. Epistemology is a branch of Philosophy which develops a theory of knowledge. It responds to questions like how do we know what we know? What are the sources of knowledge? which criteria is genuine knowledge based on. It seeks to establish the validity of knowledge. But the problem of knowledge is a vast topic which this study will not dwell on. This study explores a superficial aspect of the traditional definition of knowledge as a true justified belief where these three aspects are simplified and analyzed through seven ways of knowing proposed by Van de Lagemaat (Van de Lagemaat, 2015).

Moral autonomy on the other hand is observed by this study through Kohlberg three stages of moral autonomy. Stages of moral autonomy described by Kohlberg (Reiter, 1996) bring to light the complexity of the concept of autonomy which exhibits the connection between moral, social and intellectual aspects.

The attainment of rational and moral autonomy is a process and it was described by Kohlberg in three stages and levels of moral maturity where greater levels indicate higher autonomy for an agent:

First Stage: Preconventional morality or Premoral level: This stage is characterized by respect or not of standards depending on pleasurable gratification of physical consequences. It can be compared to baby or animal morality, where the ego's drive dictates the choice.

Level 0: Egocentric Judgment: characterized by the absence of moral concept. There is no moral principle, no rule, no obligation because any judgment made depends on individual desires.

Level 1: Punishment-Obedience driven: Obedience to rules comes as a result of avoiding punishment. The moral judgment of what is good or bad depends upon physical consequences and preoccupation for self without consideration of others' human value or moral concern.

Level 2: Instrumental-Relativist concern: Individualistic and egocentric motives drive moral choices. Consideration of others comes only as a response for satisfying personal interests. Fairness can be observed at

some extent although it comes as a pragmatic consequence not as a personal need for justice. The individual at this stage begins to think of others but still egoistic in nature.

**Second Stage : Role conformity or Conventional Morality:** The individual conforms to the established rules by society.

Level 3: Good boy Nice girl attitude: Social roles based on existing social stereotypes define the individual's moral at this stage. Intentions and approval from others are crucial and guide the individual moral choice especially when they consider you as a good person. Rules are obeyed to please others and get their approval.

Level 4: Order and Law orientation: Social order together with the authority in the existing system determine moral choice.

**Third Stage: Self-Accepted Moral Principles or Post conventional Morality:** At this stage, moral principles are internalized by the individual. Moral choices are driven by rational assessment and conscious valuing of the person despite requirements of conventional social norms.

Level 5: Social contract morality: Fundamental universal rights established by society are obeyed and they govern and orient relationships in society for the greater good.

Level 6: Universal Principle morality: at this level, beside social rules and conventions, moral principles are internalized as personal virtues. The individual obeys abstract universal principles for their good: justice, equity, reciprocity, equality and human dignity are considered personal values to which one obeys and feels guilty if they fail to live them (*Weinstock et al., 2009*)

Autonomy is a complex concept that has been debated by scholars such as Feinberg, Dworkin, Frankfurt (Christman, 1988). In Kohlberg view, the meaning of autonomy is characterized by different conceptions which interest this study especially where autonomy is described as the capacity to deliberate and set a principle for personal governance and self-determination. The concept includes also the moral, social, epistemological and logical capacity to decide for one self through one's own free will and reasoning faculty.

Kant opposes autonomy to heteronomy. For him autonomy refers to acting according to self-determined law, self-legislation but in a community where others are also law givers and respected as ends in themselves. Heteronomy indicates that the principle or law by which we make decision is determined by external agents such as the family, the church, the political leaders...For Kant, autonomous decision excludes emotions or feelings and is limited to strictly intellectual or reasoning acts that guide the freedom of the will to act in a moral way. It also excludes individualism (Timmermann, 2007).

#### **Procedural or content neutral concepts of autonomy**

Individuals are counted autonomous in this category if they have undergone a process of critical reflection and are neutral on their values, choices, interest or whether they want to achieve a particular goal or have considered the action as good.

#### **Hierarchical procedural conception of autonomy**

In hierarchical procedural, an autonomous person acts on the basis of self-consciously held values placed within a hierarchy of desires including those that are relationally and socially formed chosen according to higher-order preferences (Kovacevic, 2017).

#### **Coherentist view of autonomy**

This approach suggests that autonomy is not just about how individuals take decisions but also how and what they identify themselves or with a particular value. The above models of autonomy put focus on moral rather than cognitive autonomy. That is why this study sought to produce an epistemological framework from which analysis can be done to find out whether individuals are capable to demonstrate how they know what they know. Seven ways of knowing were therefore proposed as template and framework from which genuine knowledge can be determined.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Doug Blomberg an Australian philosopher proposed a reformational epistemology which considers knowledge in holistic pluralism suggesting a multidimensionality of knowledge (Zuidervaat, 2019). This study does not intend to look into these complex aspects of knowledge. However, instances of knowing with autonomy using an epistemological model of seven ways of knowing are observed comprising meaning, evidence, certainty, limit, perspectives, value and connection (Van de Lagemaat, 2015). These seven aspects explains how a particular object of knowledge can be explained. In meaning aspects of definition are explored to remove ambiguities and unclear aspects in a concepts. Evidence represents anything that provides a proof or a justification such as a sense experience data, a strong argument and example. Degrees of certainty are explored to indicate the level at which a human subject holds a particular truth to be certain. Different perspectives from

different experts in the subjects are given credit. Setting limits and scope within the content of knowledge is the fifth category. Determining whether a particular body of knowledge has value is also verified to know whether a particular body of knowledge is important for science and society. The last category is connection where a particular body of knowledge is checked against its connection with other bodies of knowledge and discipline.

### Method

This study subscribes to a relativistic qualitative paradigm which is different from models based on a mathematically quantifiable magnitude. An observation checklist was made out of the seven ways of knowing according to Van de Lagemaat (2015) and the Kohlberg stages of moral autonomy (Woodward, 2021) then tested in 24 secondary school classes (Tutor training colleges). The aim was to determine with personal teaching experience the effectiveness of CBC implementation in the 24 observed schools especially in the aspects of moral and epistemological autonomy since these aspects are mentioned in the curriculum as generic competences expected from learners. Results from the observation checklist were submitted to the same group of tutors in a focus group and to a sample of students' class representatives which confirmed the data obtained.

### Results and Discussion

- Teacher makes an effort to allow students to achieve personal goals with independence. This is observed when they give individual work to students and request them to produce personal reflection. However, the outcome of individual activity is mostly the repetition of teacher's content.
- Teacher makes an effort to allow students for adoption, justification and arguing of a position. This was observed when teachers asked the "why" question after an incomplete student's answer.
- Deadlines are more important than the event in question. When forty minutes scheduled for a lesson are ended, the teacher stops whether the notion is well understood or not.
- Concepts are defined but ambiguities, metaphors and connotations about them are not discussed in order to address problems of clarity and distinctiveness of the meaning conveyed. Example: The teacher in one class asked the meaning of a country and student x8 answered: *"A country is a geographical territory where people leave"*.
- More than half of statements made by learners lack evidence, lack arguments or reasons to support them. If correct, those statements are approved without rational justification behind the claims made. For example: student x17 is asked to explain why colonization was bad. The following was the answer: *"Colonization was bad because the white came in Africa."*
- More than half of statements made lack expression of doubt and interrogation about the level of certainty they carry. In these statements the teacher uses rarely or does not use hypothetical prepositions like: may be, perhaps, probably, not sure, approximately which are appropriate when there is uncertainty or when a speaker needs to express a gap in certainty. Majority of statements made are universal and categorical propositions which affirm or negate something completely, demonstrating that the teacher is not concerned by the level of certainty because they are totally sure of what is said. Teacher B3 who was concluding a history lesson was responding to a student who asked why did the Second World War break out. Teacher B3 answered: *"The Germans are the ones that caused it just because they were powerful."* Students did not question whether the answer was correct or not, they agreed.
- There is little or lack of scope (limit) about the notion studied. This means that the scope of what is being studied is not clearly defined. There is little or no explanation about missing aspects concerning the contents, the contexts, the origin, the methods, the processes and purposes of such notions. The teacher assumes that the notion is complete and self-sufficient to lead to learning. This was confirmed by the answer of teacher B5 when asked why we study mathematics. The answer was: *"Mathematics we use it everywhere in life and it is the most important subject in life"*.
- In more than half of the notions observed there is expression of multiple perspectives or views about the notion, such as opposed or contradicting views. However, less than half of the notions observed do not include interrogation or doubt about their truth. The teacher assumes that truth is obvious in those notions, lacking thus to explain the source of contradiction or controversy.
- The connection of the studied notions to other scientific disciplines is often ignored but the connection to real life situations is made in most of the subjects observed. This last aspect was observed in the class of teacher B11 who was teaching English literature and brought examples of the conversation in the market. *"Suppose your mother is a trader and she wants to attract clients, how would she explain the beauty and value of her goods?"*
- The moral, social and economic values or importance about the notion are often well explained. For example, a teacher of economy teacher B19 tells students that knowing principles of micro-economy can allow families to manage their budgets and keep peace at home.

- On moral autonomy, most observed cases of students' answers do not demonstrate a distance from others' views especially no differing from teacher's view. What the teacher says is taken for granted. There seems to be no independent decision based on personal values and conviction. In each class observed, I asked students whether they could use personal beliefs and values to question teacher's content and student x3 answered approximately what many other students said:  
*"The teacher is the one who knows what to teach and we must obey him or else we cannot learn anything"*.
- A focus group made by 22 teachers of the schools observed confirmed the above data. 2 invited tutors could not participate.
- The data above indicate that moral and epistemological aspects of autonomy defined respectively by Kohlberg and Van de Lagemaat did not appear exactly from the observation and interviews made.

## Discussion

The Rwandan context encompasses the socially constituted view of self in choosing what is adequate and valuable in education. The agent must possess what is called "normative competency", the capacity to identify and distinguish right and wrong (Haste, 2009). Autonomy in this perspective is rather like that of Emmanuel Levinas open to the disruptive call from others' needs and views and is not a pure act of self-gratification and self fulfilment (Belarev, 2017). In Rwandan secondary schools, this type of autonomy is supplemented by communitarianism and opposed to postmodernism.

## Communitarianism, postmodernism and autonomy

In developing moral and epistemological autonomy, the educational implications of the prevailing cultural context in Rwanda, the communitarianism present themselves with indefensible moral challenges because thinking is shaped rather by the community than by the individual. On the other hand, while the opposing relativistic philosophies like postmodernism, can hardly be tenable with its strong emphasis on knowledge relativity, it might be less dangerous in fostering rational and moral autonomy but it is not given room in debates made in class. Autonomy should be what we do with and for one another in the community while reasoning, challenging, arguing, and confronting each other, unlike the attitude of advancement of sameness in rationality or consensus in all matters.

While communitarian form of autonomy prevails in the Rwandan secondary school culture, the teaching approach which is dominant, the Competence Based Curriculum seems deeply rooted in both Cartesian, Kantian and postmodernism philosophies which celebrate individual's personal reasoning and decision as a value, where the self is considered an original entity and substance who possesses independent capacity to produce knowledge and to decide for self. However, observation made in class together with the focus group interview and learners' personal responses were not coherent and consistent with the above philosophies where autonomy in the Kantian conception is described as the capacity to deliberate and set a principle for personal governance and self-determination. The tendency discovered with classroom data was rather in favor of heteronomy which indicates that the principle or law by which learners make decision is more a result of external agents such as the family, the church, the society and the political leaders. This might be interpreted as the consequence of the strong dominance of moral values which were established as an antidote to the negative effects of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

While the Cartesian philosophy celebrates "I think therefore I am", Rwandan secondary schools seem to rime with the African communitarianism of "We are, therefore I am". Being in such an African world is not measured by the strength of an individuals' personal reasoning but by the capacity of an individual to identify with and to conform to the wisdom of the community because I am nothing if I don't consider my neighbor, who is my other me, my "alter ego" to use Martin Buber's expression (Smith, 1996). I find my fulfilment and my self-realization and actualization only in the accomplishment of the community call which society has designed for me. This call is so strong that personal strong reasoning that disregards or criticizes the established value can be considered as marginal. The community influence therefore contributes to a great extent directly to the individual moral and epistemological decisions and beliefs.

## Conclusions

The secondary schools data observed did not indicate that students acquire epistemological and moral autonomy in Van de lagemaat and Kohlberg ways because it was explained that moral and epistemological autonomy are not culture free competences and are closely related to the socio-historical context in which and individual evolves. Beside, the meaning of both moral and epistemological autonomy could not be taken for granted without a debate and that is why we limited ourselves to the mentioned two authors above. Each socio-historical context determines at a greater extent the meaning and the interpretation of what it means to be autonomous

morally and epistemologically. This is the reason why this study cannot claim to have provided exhaustive answers to the questions that arise from controversies around the complex variety of the concepts of autonomy. What appeared from the collected data indicates that students in Rwandan secondary schools observed relate to the teacher and to the subjects with cultural filters for the right knowledge and decision to take. The epistemological and moral autonomy cannot be seen in an individual but in the community. This is because the cultural context shapes what it means to learn and how students can relate to teachers and knowledge. Unlike the Western individual autonomy where personal reasoning is counted before collective considerations, in Rwandan secondary schools, there is rather a community consciousness and template which regulates individual's relationships to both other people and knowledge content.

## Recommendations

### To curriculum designers and political authorities:

When designing curriculum, local philosophies should be incorporated in the nature, the processes and purposes of the implementation of subjects proposed.

### To teachers, learners and school authorities:

The aim of education is cognitive and moral autonomy. This aim should inform the how to learn and teach the content, the methods and the evaluation processes considering local cultural contexts

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