# Exploring the Role of Autonomy in Science Education - A Kantian Perspective

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**DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0424**

**Received: 23 December 2025; Accepted: 29 December 2025; Published: 10 July 2026**

## ABSTRACT

The concept of autonomy occupies a central place in contemporary science education, yet it is frequently employed without sufficient philosophical clarity. This paper critically examines autonomy through a Kantian philosophical framework, arguing that dominant interpretations in science education particularly those grounded in inquiry-based and learner-centered approaches tend to reduce autonomy to student choice, engagement, and self-directed activity. While these perspectives contribute to motivation and participation, they often neglect the epistemic and normative dimensions of autonomy required for genuine scientific reasoning. Drawing on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the study reconceptualizes autonomy as rational self-governance, emphasizing the learner's capacity to evaluate, justify, and defend knowledge claims through reasoning. The analysis clarifies the epistemological, ethical, and humanistic assumptions underpinning this framework and systematically examines key pedagogical implications for science education, including inquiry-based learning, the role of the teacher, the nature of scientific knowledge, and engagement with socioscientific issues, demonstrating how each can either support or undermine the development of autonomy depending on the extent to which rational justification is foregrounded. A Kantian progression is proposed, outlining the developmental process from dependence on authority to independent rational judgment and the internalization of epistemic principles. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of ethical reasoning in addressing socioscientific issues, positioning autonomy as both an intellectual and moral capacity and structural contraints such as examination driven curricula, resource limitation, and challenges in teacher preparation that complicates the realization of Kantian autonomy in practice. The paper concludes by outlining implications for pedagogy, assessment, and teacher education, advocating for a shift from procedural engagement to the cultivation of critically reflective and rationally accountable learners. In doing so, it offers a philosophically grounded framework that redefines autonomy as a core aim of science education and aligns scientific literacy with the development of independent rational thinkers.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Science Education, Kantian Philosophy, Rational Judgment, Inquiry-Based Learning, Scientific Literacy, Socioscientific Issues

## INTRODUCTION

The purposes of science education in the twenty-first century must extend beyond the simple transmission of established scientific knowledge to students. Contemporary societies are characterized by rapid scientific advancement, complex technological systems, and global challenges such as climate change, bioethical dilemmas, and artificial intelligence governance. Within such contexts, science education is increasingly expected to cultivate learners who can critically evaluate scientific information, engage in reasoned decision-making, and participate responsibly in democratic and technological societies. Scholars in educational philosophy argue that education should not merely produce technically competent individuals but rather reflective citizens capable of independent judgment and moral reasoning (Biesta, 2015; Levinson, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). For instance, classroom discussions about climate science, genetic engineering, or nuclear energy require students to interpret empirical evidence while simultaneously evaluating ethical implications and societal consequences. This shift indicates that the goals of science education now involve intellectual autonomy, ethical awareness, and the capacity for rational deliberation. From a philosophical perspective, such expectations challenge traditional views of science education that prioritize memorization and procedural competence over reflective understanding. Instead, they suggest that science education must integrate epistemic and moral dimensions that enable learners to justify beliefs, evaluate competing claims, and take responsibility for their judgments. Therefore, the contemporary aims of science education implicitly point toward the development of autonomous thinkers, establishing the conceptual foundation for examining autonomy as a central philosophical principle in science education.

The contemporary educational system increasingly emphasizes the goal of developing autonomous learners; however, this objective is often articulated in ways that lack conceptual precision. Many curriculum frameworks promote ideals such as learner autonomy, agency, and independence as central outcomes of modern education, particularly within learner-centered pedagogies and competency-based curricula. Despite this emphasis, scholars have observed that the concept of autonomy is frequently invoked without a clear philosophical grounding or consistent definition (Yacek, 2018). In many cases, autonomy is treated as a desirable educational slogan rather than a rigorously theorized educational objective. For example, policies may encourage students to “take ownership of their learning” or “learn independently,” yet provide limited guidance about what intellectual or moral capacities such independence entails. This conceptual ambiguity creates difficulties for educators who must translate these ideals into classroom practice. Hand (2018) argues that educational concepts lacking philosophical clarity risk becoming normatively empty because they fail to specify the standards by which educational practices should be evaluated. Consequently, without a robust philosophical account, the call for autonomy may merely reinforce superficial practices that appear to promote independence while leaving deeper structures of authority and reasoning unexamined. From a philosophical standpoint, therefore, it becomes necessary to clarify the meaning and justification of autonomy within education. Establishing such clarity is essential for determining whether educational practices genuinely cultivate independent rational judgment or simply reproduce the appearance of learner freedom. This need for conceptual grounding provides an important motivation for examining autonomy through a Kantian philosophical framework.

In science education research, autonomy is commonly associated with student choice, learner-centered pedagogy, motivation, or inquiry-based learning. These approaches emphasize active participation and engagement by encouraging students to take part in selecting learning tasks, exploring scientific questions, and conducting hands-on investigations (Patall et al., 2017; Ramnarain, 2020). Within such frameworks, autonomy is often operationalized through practices such as allowing students to choose project topics, control the pace of their learning, or participate in collaborative inquiry activities. While these strategies can enhance motivation and promote deeper engagement with scientific content, they frequently conceptualize autonomy primarily in psychological or procedural terms. In this view, autonomy becomes closely linked to feelings of control, personal interest, or the opportunity to participate in learning activities. However, this interpretation risks overlooking the normative and epistemic dimensions of autonomy that are central to scientific reasoning. As Siegel (2004) argues, genuine intellectual autonomy involves the ability to evaluate evidence, justify beliefs, and accept conclusions based on rational standards rather than personal preference or external pressure. Consequently, a classroom that simply allows students to choose activities does not necessarily cultivate autonomous thinkers if students are not required to critically assess the validity of scientific claims or defend their reasoning. The emphasis on engagement without explicit attention to justification may therefore produce active learners who participate enthusiastically in inquiry but lack the intellectual tools necessary for independent scientific judgment. This limitation suggests that existing approaches to autonomy in science education require a stronger philosophical foundation capable of integrating engagement with rational accountability.

A philosophical perspective that offers significant insight into the concept of autonomy is the work of Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy places autonomy at the center of rational human agency. Kant conceptualizes autonomy not merely as freedom of choice but as the capacity of rational individuals to govern themselves according to principles that they can justify through reason. This implies that, an autonomous person does not simply act according to personal preferences or external influences but instead follows self-imposed rational laws derived from critical reflection and moral reasoning (Wood, 2016). This conception of autonomy therefore emphasizes the importance of rational deliberation, intellectual responsibility, and the ability to justify one's judgments according to universal principles. When applied to education, this perspective suggests that the primary aim of teaching should be to cultivate the learner's capacity for independent rational judgment rather than mere compliance with authority or uncritical acceptance of information. Contemporary educational philosophers argue that Kant's framework remains highly relevant because it highlights the ethical responsibility of education to develop learners who can critically assess claims, evaluate evidence, and make decisions grounded in rational justification (Yacek, 2018). For example, in the context of science education, a Kantian approach would encourage students not only to learn scientific facts but also to understand the reason and evidence that support scientific knowledge. Such an approach aligns closely with the broader goals of scientific literacy, which include critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, and responsible participation in societal debates involving science and technology. Thus, Kant's philosophical account of autonomy provides a powerful theoretical foundation for examining how science education can cultivate learners capable of independent and rational engagement with scientific knowledge.

**Kantian Autonomy as an Educational Ideal**

In Kantian moral philosophy, autonomy is understood as the capacity of rational agents to determine their actions according to principles that they give to themselves through reason. Rather than being guided by impulse, external authority, or personal inclination, an autonomous individual acts according to principles that can be justified rationally and accepted as universally valid. Kant's conception of autonomy is grounded in the idea that rational beings possess the ability to evaluate reasons for action and commit themselves to moral laws that they recognize as binding (Kant, I. 2002. Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals). Contemporary interpreters of Kant, such as Allen W. Wood, emphasize that this self-legislation is not arbitrary but governed by rational consistency and universality, which form the basis of moral responsibility (Wood, 2018). In this sense, autonomy represents the foundation of moral agency because only individuals who act from self-imposed rational principles can be held accountable for their decisions. When applied to educational contexts, this philosophical perspective suggests that the purpose of education is not merely to transmit knowledge but to cultivate the rational capacities that enable learners to evaluate beliefs, justify decisions, and act responsibly. Consequently, Kant's conception of autonomy provides a normative foundation for understanding how science education can contribute to the formation of rational and morally responsible learners.

The understanding of autonomy in Kant's perspective, fundamentally challenges the widespread assumption that freedom consists simply in the absence of restriction or external control. In many contemporary educational discourses, freedom is often interpreted as allowing students unrestricted choice or minimizing teacher authority in the classroom. However, Kant rejects this interpretation by arguing that genuine freedom is realized not through arbitrary choice but through the capacity to commit oneself to rationally justified principles (Kant, I. 2002. *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*). Philosophers of education such as David T. Hansen and Michael Hand emphasize that Kantian freedom involves disciplined reasoning and moral responsibility rather than unregulated preference satisfaction (Hand, 2018). From this perspective, a purely permissive educational environment that prioritizes unrestricted choice may actually undermine the development of autonomy because it fails to cultivate the intellectual discipline required for rational judgment. Instead, autonomy must be understood as the ability to critically examine one's beliefs and actions in light of universalizable principles. This reinterpretation has significant implications for science education, where students must learn to justify scientific claims through evidence and rational argument rather than personal opinion. Thus, Kant's account of freedom reorients educational discussions of autonomy toward the cultivation of rational self-governance.

Kant's reflections on education reveals a moral conception of autonomy into a pedagogical framework that emphasizes the cultivation of independent reasoning. The ultimate aim of education is to enable individuals to "think for themselves," a capacity that allows learners to critically examine beliefs rather than accept them unreflectively. Such intellectual independence cannot emerge spontaneously without guidance and structured learning environments. Educational theorists such as Lawrence J. Yacek argue that Kant's pedagogical vision involves a gradual developmental process in which learners are guided toward autonomy through carefully structured educational experiences (Yacek, 2018). In the early stages of education, discipline and external direction are necessary to cultivate habits such as attentiveness, perseverance, and respect for rational norms. Rather than contradicting autonomy, these forms of guidance help learners acquire the intellectual tools required for independent judgment. Within science education, this pedagogical approach suggests that teachers play an essential role in scaffolding students' reasoning abilities while gradually encouraging them to take responsibility for evaluating scientific explanations and evidence. Thus, autonomy in science education is not the elimination of teacher authority but as a developmental outcome supported through structured pedagogical engagement.

The Kantian conception of autonomy as an educational ideal rests on three interconnected assumptions concerning knowledge, ethics, and the status of the learner. First, from an epistemological perspective, knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed through rational inquiry and critical reflection. Learners must therefore engage in processes of questioning, reasoning, and evidence evaluation to develop genuine understanding. Second, the framework incorporates an ethical assumption that education has a moral purpose: it aims to cultivate individuals who act from rational principles and moral duty rather than merely following personal inclinations. Scholars such as Gert Biesta emphasize that education involves the formation of responsible subjects capable of making ethical judgments within democratic societies (Biesta, 2010). Third, the framework reflects a humanistic commitment derived from Kant's moral philosophy, which insists that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves rather than as instruments for external goals such as economic productivity or institutional performance (Curren, 2006). When considered together, these assumptions provide a comprehensive normative framework for evaluating educational practices, particularly in science classrooms where students must learn to reason scientifically while also recognizing the ethical implications of scientific knowledge. By integrating epistemological, ethical, and humanistic dimensions, autonomy in science education offers a robust philosophical foundation for guiding the aims and practices of science education.

**The Distinctive Contribution of a Kantian Account to Science Education**

The field of science education often addresses the concept of autonomy through psychological and constructivist perspectives. However, a Kantian philosophical framework offers a distinct and deeper interpretation of autonomy. Researchers working within self-determination theory argue that students become more autonomous when they experience a sense of volition and personal ownership over their learning processes (Patall et al., 2017). Similarly, constructivist approaches emphasize the learner's active role in constructing meaning through engagement with scientific phenomena and collaborative inquiry. While these perspectives contribute valuable insights into how students engage with learning environments, they do not fully address the normative question of how learners should justify their reasoning or evaluate the validity of their conclusions. Scholars such as Boghossian (2006) argue that educational approaches focused primarily on personal meaning-making risk overlooking the standards of justification that underpin rational inquiry. In the context of science education, this limitation becomes particularly significant because scientific knowledge depends on shared criteria of evidence, logical reasoning, and methodological rigor rather than individual interpretation alone. This perspective therefore introduces an important philosophical dimension by emphasizing that autonomy involves not merely the freedom to construct meaning but the responsibility to justify beliefs according to rational standards. Consequently, true autonomy in science education requires learners to engage critically with evidence and reasoning rather than simply exercising personal choice in the learning process.

The self-deterministic account of autonomy contributes to science education by emphasizing the role of rational justification in the formation of knowledge and belief. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, autonomy is closely tied to the capacity of rational agents to evaluate claims through reason and to accept only those principles that can be justified through critical reflection. This perspective aligns strongly with the epistemic foundations of science, where knowledge claims are validated through systematic observation, logical reasoning, and empirical evidence. Contemporary scholars in the philosophy of science education argue that scientific literacy requires learners not only to understand scientific concepts but also to appreciate the reasoning processes that justify those concepts (Hand, 2018; Matthews, 2015). For example, when students learn about theories such as evolution or climate change, genuine understanding involves more than memorizing conclusions; it requires examining the evidence, assessing competing explanations, and recognizing the methodological standards that guide scientific inquiry. This perspective therefore frames science learning as an exercise in rational evaluation rather than passive acceptance of authoritative knowledge. This orientation encourages students to question assumptions, analyze evidence, and develop well-reasoned judgments based on shared epistemic standards. In doing so, science education moves beyond simple knowledge transmission and instead cultivates learners capable of critically engaging with scientific ideas and defending their conclusions through reasoned argument. Such an approach demonstrates how Kantian autonomy provides a philosophical foundation for understanding scientific inquiry as a disciplined form of rational judgment.

**Pedagogical Implications**

**Inquiry and Rational Justification**

Inquiry-based science education is widely promoted as an instructional approach capable of fostering learner autonomy; however, a Kantian philosophical analysis reveals that this relationship is more complex than it initially appears. Inquiry methods encourage students to explore questions, conduct investigations, and interpret scientific phenomena through active engagement, which can potentially empower learners to take greater responsibility for their learning. Nevertheless, from a philosophical standpoint, autonomy is not achieved simply because students participate in investigations or control aspects of classroom activities. Rather, autonomy develops when inquiry requires learners to engage in the disciplined use of reason. This involves the formulation of hypotheses, the systematic collection and evaluation of evidence, the revision of explanations in light of new data, and the justification of claims according to standards that extend beyond personal preference or subjective interpretation. Scholars of science education emphasize that inquiry becomes educationally meaningful when students are guided to connect empirical observations with logical argumentation and evidence-based reasoning (Furtak et al., 2012; Osborne, 2010; Jiménez-Aleixandre & Erduran, 2008). For example, during a classroom investigation on heat transfer, students might collect temperature data from different materials; however, genuine intellectual autonomy emerges only when they analyze the data critically, compare alternative explanations, and defend their conclusions using scientific reasoning. Without this emphasis on justification, inquiry risks becoming a procedural exercise rather than a process of rational evaluation. Therefore, inquiry-based learning contributes to autonomy only when it requires students to justify their conclusions through evidence and logical reasoning, thereby aligning scientific learning with the broader goal of cultivating independent rational judgment.

Inquiry-based learning contributes to autonomy only when it encourages students to recognize and apply the rational standards that govern scientific knowledge. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, autonomy is defined as the ability of rational agents to guide their judgments according to principles that can be justified through reason. When applied to science education, this view implies that students must understand not only how to conduct investigations but also why certain forms of reasoning and evidence are considered valid within scientific practice. Inquiry activities therefore become meaningful when learners critically examine the relationship between evidence and explanation, evaluating whether their conclusions are logically supported by the data they have gathered. Educational research suggests that classroom practices such as scientific argumentation, evidence-based discussion, and peer critique play a crucial role in helping students develop this form of reasoning (Osborne, 2016; Jiménez-Aleixandre & Erduran, 2008). For instance, when students present competing explanations for an experimental result and must defend their claims using empirical evidence, they begin to appreciate the rational norms that structure scientific inquiry. Through such processes, learners gradually develop the capacity to evaluate scientific claims independently rather than relying solely on the authority of teachers or textbooks. Consequently, inquiry-based learning supports the development of autonomy when it explicitly connects investigative activities with the rational principles that justify scientific knowledge, enabling students to participate in science as a reasoned and evidence-driven practice.

Despite the potential of inquiry-based learning to promote autonomy, its implementation in many science classrooms often falls short of cultivating genuine independent reasoning. In practice, inquiry activities are sometimes reduced to structured laboratory exercises where students follow predetermined procedures designed by the teacher or textbook. While such activities may increase engagement and provide opportunities for hands-on experience, they may not necessarily develop the intellectual capacities associated with autonomy. When students simply follow instructions to obtain expected results, they may focus primarily on completing tasks rather than critically evaluating the reasoning behind their observations. Educational scholars have noted that inquiry without explicit emphasis on reasoning and justification can lead to superficial forms of participation that fail to deepen students' understanding of scientific thinking (Osborne, 2010; Furtak et al., 2012). For example, students might successfully perform an experiment demonstrating heat conduction yet remain unable to explain why the observed outcomes support particular scientific explanations. In such cases, inquiry becomes a procedural activity rather than an opportunity for rational reflection and conceptual understanding. From a Kantian perspective, this limitation is significant because autonomy requires the ability to evaluate claims through reason rather than simply carrying out prescribed actions. Therefore, effective inquiry-based instruction must move beyond procedural engagement to include structured opportunities for students to analyze evidence, justify conclusions, and critically examine alternative explanations. By emphasizing reasoning and justification, science education can transform inquiry from a mechanical exercise into a process that genuinely cultivates independent rational judgment.

**The Role of the Teacher in Cultivating Autonomy**

The role of the teacher remains central in cultivating learner autonomy within science education, particularly when viewed through a Kantian philosophical framework. While modern educational discourse often emphasizes student-centered learning and reduced teacher authority, this does not imply that teachers become passive facilitators in the learning process. Rather, teachers play a critical role in guiding students toward the disciplined use of reason that characterizes genuine intellectual autonomy. Autonomy involves the ability of individuals to govern their thinking according to rational principles rather than external authority or personal inclination. Within science classrooms, teachers therefore serve as intellectual guides who help students recognize the standards of reasoning that underpin scientific knowledge. Educational research highlights that effective science teaching involves scaffolding students' reasoning processes, modeling scientific argumentation, and creating opportunities for learners to evaluate evidence critically (Osborne, 2016; Furtak et al., 2012). For example, during classroom discussions about experimental results, teachers may prompt students to justify their conclusions, compare alternative explanations, and reflect on the reliability of their data. Such practices help learners understand that scientific claims must be supported by logical reasoning and empirical evidence. In this way, the teacher's role is not to impose knowledge but to cultivate the intellectual capacities that enable students to reason independently. Consequently, the teacher becomes a facilitator of rational inquiry, guiding students toward the development of autonomous scientific thinking while maintaining the epistemic rigor necessary for meaningful science learning.

The assumption that autonomy requires minimizing teacher authority could be challenge. Education involves constraint, particularly in guiding learners toward rational self-governance. Autonomy does not mean the absence of external influence but rather the capacity of individuals to regulate their actions according to rational principles they can endorse as universally valid (Kant, 2002; Wood, 2018). From this perspective, the presence of teacher authority in the classroom is not inherently incompatible with autonomy; instead, it can function as an essential pedagogical resource for cultivating the intellectual and moral capacities that make autonomy possible. In science education, teachers play a critical role in introducing students to the norms of scientific reasoning, including evidence evaluation, logical consistency, and the justification of claims through publicly accessible standards (Siegel, 2004; Erduran & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2020). Without such guidance, students may engage in inquiry activities that prioritize personal opinion or procedural completion rather than disciplined reasoning. For example, when teachers structure inquiry-based investigations, they often set methodological boundaries, provide conceptual scaffolding, and challenge unsupported conclusions.

These forms of pedagogical constraint are not forms of domination but conditions that help learners internalize the epistemic standards of scientific practice. Over time, such guidance enables students to move from reliance on external authority toward the capacity to justify their own claims and evaluate competing explanations independently (Biesta, 2015; Yacek, 2018). In this way, teacher authority serves a developmental function: it establishes the rational framework within which learners gradually acquire the ability to govern their own reasoning. Recognizing this relationship between authority and autonomy therefore clarifies an important implication for science education, which implies that the cultivation of genuine intellectual independence depends not on the elimination of teacher guidance but on its careful use in fostering students' capacity for rational judgment learners to think for themselves.

**Developing Autonomy in Science Education**

The development of autonomy in science education can be understood as a gradual progression from dependence on external authority to the exercise of independent rational judgment. From a Learners do not begin as fully autonomous agents; rather, they acquire autonomy through a structured process of intellectual development that enables them to use reason independently. In early stages of learning, students often rely heavily on teachers, textbooks, and established scientific authorities for knowledge. This dependence is not inherently problematic, as it provides the foundational knowledge and conceptual frameworks necessary for further learning. However, the goal of science education is not to maintain this dependence but to gradually transition learners toward the capacity to evaluate knowledge claims for themselves. Educational theorists emphasize that this progression involves moving from guided instruction to increasing levels of student responsibility in reasoning, argumentation, and decision-making (Osborne, 2016; Furtak et al., 2012). For example, students may initially learn scientific concepts through direct instruction, but over time they should be encouraged to question assumptions, analyze evidence, and justify their conclusions independently. This developmental trajectory highlights that enlightenment involves emerging from intellectual dependence through the disciplined use of reason. Therefore, a progression in science education involves structuring learning experiences in ways that gradually cultivate learners' capacity for independent rational thought, ensuring that autonomy is developed systematically rather than assumed prematurely.

A further stage in this progression involves the development of independent rational judgment, where learners actively engage in evaluating scientific claims based on evidence and logical reasoning. At this point, students are expected to move beyond simply understanding scientific concepts to critically examining the validity of those concepts. Autonomy is realized when individuals are able to determine for themselves whether a claim is justified according to rational principles.

Applied to science education, this means that students must learn to assess the quality of evidence, identify assumptions, and consider alternative explanations when engaging with scientific ideas. Research in science education highlights the importance of argumentation and evidence-based reasoning in fostering these skills, as students learn to construct and defend claims while responding to critiques from peers (Osborne, 2016; Jiménez-Aleixandre & Erduran, 2008). For instance, during classroom debates on socioscientific issues such as climate change or biotechnology, students must evaluate competing perspectives and justify their positions using scientific evidence. Such activities encourage learners to take intellectual responsibility for their judgments rather than relying on external authority. This stage of development is crucial because it marks the transition from guided reasoning to genuine intellectual independence. Therefore, cultivating independent rational judgment represents a key step in the Kantian progression toward autonomy in science education.

The final stage of this progression involves the internalization of rational principles, where learners consistently apply standards of reasoning across different contexts without reliance on external guidance. At this level, autonomy is not merely demonstrated in isolated classroom activities but becomes a stable intellectual disposition that shapes how individuals approach knowledge and decision-making. True autonomy is achieved when individuals act according to principles they have rationally endorsed, rather than being influenced by external authority or unexamined beliefs. In science education, this implies that students develop the capacity to independently evaluate new information, question unsupported claims, and apply scientific reasoning to unfamiliar problems.

Educational scholars argue that such dispositions are essential for lifelong learning and informed participation in a society increasingly shaped by science and technology (Matthews, 2015; Osborne, 2016). For example, an autonomous learner should be able to critically assess scientific information encountered in the media, distinguish between credible and unreliable sources, and make reasoned decisions based on available evidence. This level of autonomy reflects not only cognitive competence but also intellectual integrity, as learners recognize their responsibility to base their judgments on rational justification. Therefore, the internalization of rational principles represents the culmination of the Kantian progression, where science education successfully produces individuals capable of sustained independent reasoning and responsible engagement with scientific knowledge.

**Ethical Reasoning and Socioscientific Issues**

Ethical reasoning within socioscientific issues represents a critical dimension of autonomy in science education lens. Socioscientific issues such as climate change, genetic engineering, and public health policies inherently involve both scientific evidence and moral considerations, requiring learners to navigate complex intersections between facts and values. Autonomy is not limited to epistemic reasoning but also encompasses the capacity to make moral judgments based on rational principles. This implies that science education should not only develop students' ability to evaluate empirical evidence but also their capacity to deliberate ethically about the implications of scientific advancements. Educational research highlights that engaging students in socioscientific issues can enhance critical thinking, moral reasoning, and decision-making skills by requiring them to consider multiple perspectives and justify their positions (Sadler, 2011; Zeidler, 2014). For example, when discussing the ethical implications of genetic modification, students must evaluate scientific benefits alongside potential risks and moral concerns. Such engagement encourages learners to move beyond surface-level understanding toward a deeper appreciation of the responsibilities associated with scientific knowledge. Therefore, integrating ethical reasoning into science education is essential for developing autonomous individuals who can make informed and responsible decisions in contexts where science and society intersect.

Ethical reasoning in science education must be grounded in principles that can be justified through rational deliberation rather than personal preference or social influence. In Kant's moral philosophy, actions are considered morally valid when they are guided by universalizable principles that respect the rational agency of all individuals. Applied to socioscientific issues, this perspective requires students to evaluate not only what is scientifically possible but also what ought to be done based on ethical reasoning. For instance, in debates about climate change mitigation strategies, students must consider questions of fairness, responsibility, and the impact of decisions on present and future generations. Educational scholars argue that structured classroom discussions and argumentation activities can support the development of such reasoning by encouraging students to articulate and defend their ethical positions using logical arguments and evidence (Zeidler, 2014; Sadler, 2011). However, without explicit guidance, students may rely on unexamined beliefs, cultural norms, or emotional reactions when making ethical judgments. This limitation can be addressed by emphasizing the importance of critical reflection and the use of reason in moral decision-making. Consequently, science education should create opportunities for students to engage in ethical deliberation that is both reflective and grounded in rational principles, thereby strengthening the connection between scientific understanding and moral autonomy.

The integration of socioscientific issues into science education also highlights the role of dialogue and argumentation in fostering both ethical and intellectual autonomy. Engaging with complex societal problems requires students to consider diverse viewpoints, evaluate competing arguments, and justify their own positions in a reasoned manner. In this context, classroom discourse becomes a vital space for the development of autonomous thinking, as students learn to engage respectfully with others while defending their ideas through evidence and logical reasoning. Such interactions can be seen as opportunities for learners to exercise their rational capacities in a social context, where autonomy is expressed through the ability to participate in reasoned dialogue rather than through isolated individual thinking. Research in science education indicates that argumentation-based instruction enhances students' ability to evaluate evidence, construct coherent arguments, and reflect on the strengths and limitations of different perspectives (Osborne, 2016; Jiménez-Aleixandre & Erduran, 2008). For example, classroom debates on issues such as vaccination policies or environmental conservation require students to integrate scientific knowledge with ethical reasoning while responding to opposing viewpoints. These experiences not only deepen conceptual understanding but also cultivate the dispositions necessary for responsible citizenship. Therefore, the use of socioscientific issues as a pedagogical tool supports the development of autonomy by engaging students in the kind of reasoned, dialogic processes that underpin both scientific inquiry and ethical decision-making.

**Structural Constraints and Limitations**

Despite the strong normative appeal of self-deterministic autonomy as an educational ideal, its practical implementation within science education is significantly constrained by structural factors embedded in educational systems. While this philosophy emphasizes the cultivation of rational self-governance and moral responsibility, real-world classrooms operate within institutional frameworks that often prioritize efficiency, standardization, and measurable outcomes. Educational policies frequently emphasize performance indicators such as examination results and curriculum coverage, which can limit opportunities for the kind of reflective and dialogical learning required for autonomy (Biesta, 2015). In many contexts, particularly in examination-driven systems, teachers may feel compelled to focus on content delivery rather than fostering critical reasoning and independent judgment. This tension highlights a fundamental challenge: the ideals of Kantian autonomy require time, intellectual engagement, and pedagogical flexibility, all of which may be constrained by systemic demands. Therefore, while this rationality provides a compelling philosophical framework, its realization in science education must contend with broader institutional limitations that shape teaching and learning practices.

One of the most significant structural barriers to the implementation of Kantian autonomy in science education is the dominance of examination-oriented curricula. In many educational systems, high-stakes assessments play a central role in determining students' academic progression and future opportunities, thereby exerting strong influence on teaching practices. As a result, instruction often becomes narrowly focused on preparing students to perform well in standardized tests, which typically prioritize factual recall and procedural competence over critical reasoning and conceptual understanding (Au, 2011). This emphasis can discourage teachers from adopting pedagogical approaches that promote inquiry, debate, and reflective thinking, as such activities may be perceived as time-consuming or misaligned with assessment requirements. From a self-deterministic perspective, this creates a misalignment between the goals of education and its evaluative mechanisms, as the development of rational autonomy cannot be adequately measured through standardized testing alone. Consequently, the dominance of examination-oriented curricula represents a structural constraint that limits the extent to which science education can foster genuine intellectual and moral autonomy.

Resource constraints and challenging classroom conditions constitute another significant limitation to the realization of autonomy in science education. In many educational settings, particularly in under-resourced contexts, large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and inadequate laboratory facilities restrict the implementation of pedagogical approaches that support inquiry and critical reasoning. Effective cultivation of autonomy requires interactive learning environments where students can engage in discussion, experimentation, and reflective activities. However, when teachers must manage overcrowded classrooms or lack access to essential teaching resources, they may resort to more directive and teacher-centered methods as a practical necessity (Ramnarain, 2020). This situation is especially relevant in developing contexts, where systemic inequalities can exacerbate disparities in educational quality. From a self-deterministic standpoint, such conditions hinder the development of rational self-governance by limiting opportunities for students to actively engage with knowledge and practice independent reasoning. Thus, addressing resource constraints is essential for translating the philosophical ideal of autonomy into meaningful educational practice.

The effective promotion of autonomy in science education is further constrained by challenges related to teacher preparation and professional development. Many teachers may lack the training required to implement pedagogical strategies that foster critical reasoning, argumentation, and ethical reflection. Traditional teacher education programs often emphasize content knowledge and classroom management rather than the facilitation of inquiry-based and dialogical learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As a result, teachers may be uncertain about how to balance guidance with student independence or how to support the development of rational judgment in practice. Additionally, limited access to ongoing professional development opportunities can hinder teachers' ability to adopt innovative teaching approaches aligned with the principles of true autonomy in science education. Teachers themselves must embody the qualities of rational autonomy in order to cultivate these capacities in their students. Therefore, improving teacher education and professional development is a critical step in overcoming structural barriers and advancing the implementation of autonomy as an educational ideal.

In addition to structural challenges, there are important conceptual limitations associated with applying the principles of autonomy across diverse educational and cultural contexts. The self-deterministic philosophy is grounded in a particular conception of rationality and individual moral agency that may not fully align with all cultural perspectives on education and person-hood. In some contexts, educational practices emphasize communal values, relational identities, and collective responsibilities, which may appear to contrast with the individualistic emphasis often associated with Kantian autonomy (Waghid, 2014). This raises questions about the universality and adaptability of Kantian principles in pluralistic educational settings. However, contemporary scholars argue that educational autonomy can be interpreted in ways that accommodate social and cultural dimensions of learning by emphasizing rational dialogue and mutual respect rather than isolated individualism. Autonomy in science education requires careful contextualization to ensure that it remains relevant and responsive to local educational needs and values. Recognizing these conceptual limitations does not undermine the value of Kantian autonomy but rather highlights the importance of critically adapting philosophical frameworks to diverse educational realities. This reinforces the broader argument of the study that while Kantian autonomy offers a powerful normative ideal, its application must be both context-sensitive and critically informed.

**Implications for Science Education**

An analysis of the self-deterministic autonomy in science education carries significant implications for the design and practice of science education, particularly in redefining the aims of teaching and learning. If autonomy is understood not merely as student independence but as the capacity for rational self-governance, then science education must prioritize the development of learners' ability to justify knowledge claims through evidence and reasoning. This requires a shift away from instructional approaches that emphasize rote memorization and passive reception of scientific facts toward pedagogies that actively engage students in critical thinking and argumentation. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate individuals who can think for themselves and make judgments grounded in reason. Translating this into science classrooms implies that teachers should design learning experiences that challenge students to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and defend their conclusions logically. Educational research supports this view, indicating that practices such as inquiry-based learning, scientific argumentation, and problem-based instruction can enhance students' reasoning abilities when properly implemented (Osborne, 2016; Furtak et al., 2012). For example, rather than simply teaching scientific laws, educators might engage students in activities that require them to derive these laws from experimental data or critique competing explanations. Such approaches not only deepen conceptual understanding but also promote the intellectual habits associated with autonomy. Therefore, the self-deterministic perspective reorients science education toward the cultivation of rational agency, emphasizing that the primary aim of teaching is to develop learners who can think critically and independently about scientific knowledge.

A further implication concerns the role of assessment in science education, which must be aligned with the goal of developing autonomous reasoning rather than merely testing factual recall. Traditional assessment practices often prioritize the reproduction of correct answers, thereby reinforcing a view of knowledge as something to be memorized rather than critically examined. Such approaches are insufficient because they do not evaluate the learner's capacity for rational judgment. Instead, assessment should focus on students' ability to construct arguments, justify claims with evidence, and critically evaluate alternative explanations. Scholars in science education advocate for assessment methods such as open-ended investigations, written explanations, and structured argumentation tasks that allow students to demonstrate their reasoning processes (Osborne, 2016; Jiménez-Aleixandre & Erduran, 2008). For instance, students might be asked to analyze experimental data and provide a reasoned explanation for their conclusions, including a discussion of possible limitations or competing interpretations. These forms of assessment not only measure understanding but also reinforce the importance of justification and critical evaluation in scientific inquiry. By aligning assessment practices with the development of rational autonomy, educators can ensure that students are rewarded for thinking independently and engaging deeply with scientific ideas. Consequently, rethinking assessment is essential for creating educational environments that genuinely support the cultivation of autonomous learners.

Teacher preparation and professional development is very important in fostering autonomy within science education. Teachers must themselves possess a strong understanding of the epistemic foundations of science and the philosophical principles underlying autonomy in order to effectively cultivate these qualities in their students. This requires moving beyond content knowledge to include pedagogical strategies that emphasize reasoning, argumentation, and critical inquiry. Teacher education programs should equip educators with the skills to facilitate discussions, guide inquiry, and support students in developing independent judgments. Research indicates that teachers who are trained in inquiry-based and argumentation-focused approaches are better able to create classroom environments that promote deeper understanding and critical thinking (Furtak et al., 2012; Osborne, 2016). For example, teachers may need to learn how to pose open-ended questions, scaffold student reasoning, and provide feedback that encourages reflection rather than simply correcting errors. Additionally, professional development should help teachers recognize the balance between providing guidance and allowing students the freedom to explore ideas independently. Without such preparation, there is a risk that autonomy will be interpreted superficially, leading to practices that emphasize activity without fostering genuine reasoning. Therefore, investing in teacher development is essential for translating the philosophical ideal of autonomy into effective classroom practice, ensuring that science education fulfills its role in cultivating rational and independent thinkers.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the concept of autonomy in science education through the philosophical framework developed by Immanuel Kant, with the aim of clarifying how autonomy should be understood as an educational ideal. The analysis has shown that Kantian autonomy(self-deterministic) differs significantly from common interpretations within contemporary science education, where autonomy is often equated with student choice, learner-centered instruction, or motivational engagement. Autonomy is the capacity of rational agents to govern themselves according to principles that can be justified through reason and accepted as universally valid (Kant, I. 2002. *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*). By exploring the philosophical foundations of this concept, the study has argued that science education should prioritize the development of students' rational judgment, critical reasoning, and moral responsibility rather than focusing exclusively on the transmission of scientific content. The discussion further demonstrated that implementing this vision requires a reinterpretation of the teacher's role, the design of classroom practices that encourage reflective reasoning, and the integration of ethical considerations into the teaching of scientific knowledge. At the same time, the paper acknowledged that significant structural and contextual constraints including examination-driven curricula, limited resources, and challenges in teacher preparation can limit the realization of Kantian autonomy in educational practice. Despite these challenges, the self-deterministic framework remains valuable because it provides a robust normative foundation for understanding the deeper purposes of science education in modern societies. Ultimately, the study concludes that science education should not only aim to produce scientifically knowledgeable students but also to cultivate rational and morally responsible individuals capable of critically engaging with scientific knowledge and its implications for society.

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