

CZU: 37.015.3:159.923:17:159.947.5

[https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5\(195\)2026_29](https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(195)2026_29)

INCURSION INTO THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL AUTONOMY

Liliana STOICA,*“Ion Creanga” State Pedagogical University of Chisinau*

Personal autonomy represents a central construct in philosophical, psychological, and educational reflection, essential for understanding personality formation and self-regulation. This article analyzes the conceptual evolution of autonomy across major theoretical paradigms, from classical moral-rational interpretations to contemporary perspectives based on self-determination and psychosocial development. The study adopts a theoretical-analytical approach grounded in comparative analysis of interdisciplinary literature. Findings highlight the multidimensional nature of autonomy and the interdependence of its moral, cognitive, affective, and educational dimensions. The results confirm that personal autonomy is not a fixed trait but a developmental process shaped by interaction between internal maturation and educational context, functioning as a key indicator of reflexive maturity and a fundamental objective of contemporary education.

Keywords: *personal autonomy, self-determination, moral development, educational autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-regulated learning, personal identity, reflective competence.*

INCURSIUNE ÎN EVOLUȚIA CONCEPTULUI DE AUTONOMIE PERSONALĂ

Autonomia personală reprezintă un construct central în reflecția filosofică, psihologică și educațională, esențial pentru înțelegerea formării personalității și a autoreglării. Articolul analizează evoluția conceptuală a autonomiei în principalele paradigme teoretice, de la interpretările moral-raționale clasice la abordările contemporane bazate pe autodeterminare și dezvoltare psihosocială. Studiul are caracter teoretico-analitic și se bazează pe analiza comparativă a literaturii interdisciplinare. Rezultatele evidențiază caracterul multidimensional al autonomiei și interdependența dimensiunilor sale morale, cognitive, afective și educaționale. Se confirmă că autonomia nu este o trăsătură fixă, ci un proces de dezvoltare rezultat din interacțiunea dintre maturizarea internă și contextul educațional, constituind un indicator al maturității reflexive și un obiectiv fundamental al educației contemporane.

Cuvinte-cheie: *autonomie personală, autodeterminare, dezvoltare morală, autonomie educațională, motivație intrinsecă, învățare autoreglată, identitate personală, competență reflexivă.*

Introduction

Personal autonomy is a central concept in reflections on the human condition, situated at the intersection of freedom, responsibility, and identity formation. Rather than a univocal notion, it has undergone significant theoretical evolution across moral philosophy, developmental psychology, and education sciences. While classical traditions associated autonomy with moral self-legislation, contemporary approaches interpret it as a multidimensional process involving cognitive self-regulation, affective maturation, and decision-making competence.

Etymologically derived from the Greek *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law), autonomy denotes the individual's capacity for self-legislation. This meaning was systematically formulated by Immanuel Kant, who defined autonomy as “the property of the will of being a law to itself” [1], emphasizing that the will is autonomous only when determined by the moral law. Within the liberal tradition, John Stuart Mill expanded the concept by linking it to individual liberty and personal development, arguing that individuality is a fundamental element of well-being [2].

Later theoretical developments shifted the interpretation of autonomy from a strictly normative principle toward a developmental process. Piaget demonstrated that moral autonomy emerges through cooperation and cognitive maturation [3], while Erikson associated it with voluntary behavioral control and identity formation [4]. In educational thought, autonomy is connected to active participation in one's own formation:

Dewey defined freedom as the capacity to shape one's experience [5], and Montessori identified independence as the primary goal of education [6].

Contemporary perspectives, particularly self-determination theory proposed by Deci and Ryan, conceptualize autonomy as behavior that is self-initiated and aligned with internalized values, whose satisfaction supports optimal functioning and well-being [7]. Within this framework, personal autonomy is understood as an integrative construct uniting moral, psychological, and educational dimensions and representing a key objective of contemporary education.

Against this background, the present study analyzes the evolution of the concept of personal autonomy and proposes an integrative model for understanding its role in the development of autonomous and reflective personalities.

Research Aim

The study aims to examine the conceptual evolution of personal autonomy across major philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical paradigms in order to clarify its theoretical status and relevance for the sciences of education. The analysis seeks to identify the constitutive dimensions of autonomy and to formulate an integrative interpretative framework applicable to contemporary educational processes.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a theoretical design grounded in critical analysis and comparative synthesis of relevant scholarly literature addressing the problem of personal autonomy. The bibliographic corpus includes classical and contemporary works from moral philosophy, developmental psychology, and pedagogy, selected according to criteria of conceptual relevance and theoretical significance. This methodological approach enables the correlation of interdisciplinary perspectives and facilitates the identification of the multidimensional structure of personal autonomy as a complex construct situated at the intersection of normative, developmental, and educational frameworks.

Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Personal Autonomy

The conceptualization of personal autonomy in modern European thought is closely connected to the emergence of moral subjectivity and the affirmation of reason as an autonomous normative authority. Within the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, autonomy became a defining criterion of personhood, marking a rupture from heteronomous models of conduct grounded in external authority, tradition, or affective determinations. The modern subject came to be understood as an instance capable of grounding its own norms, and this capacity constitutes the core of human dignity.

In Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, autonomy acquires the status of a constitutive principle of morality. The philosopher asserts that autonomy of the will is the property by which the will is a law to itself [1], emphasizing that the will is autonomous only insofar as it determines itself according to the moral law. Kantian autonomy is inseparable from universality and responsibility: the moral subject acts according to maxims that can be universalized, and human dignity derives precisely from the capacity to act out of duty. Consequently, autonomy does not express empirical freedom but moral freedom – the rational capacity for self-determination – with direct implications for education, where the cultivation of autonomy entails developing critical deliberation and responsible judgment.

Within the liberal tradition, John Stuart Mill shifts the emphasis from the universality of moral norms to the individuality of the person. He argues that the exercise of power over an individual is legitimate only to prevent harm to others [2] and maintains that individuality is an essential component of well-being. In this perspective, autonomy becomes a condition of personal development and social progress, associated with freedom of choice and pluralism of life forms.

Comparatively, Kantian autonomy is normative and transcendental, whereas Millian autonomy is contextual and existential. Nevertheless, both perspectives converge in the idea that autonomy expresses personal maturity and responsibility. In contemporary analytic ethics, Ernst Tugendhat interprets autonomy as a form of reflexive responsibility grounded in the individual's capacity to rationally justify one's own ac-

tions. This dual philosophical tradition laid the foundations for later developments of the concept, which in contemporary reflection is analyzed not only as a moral principle but also as a formative process dependent on social and educational conditions of human development.

Autonomy in Developmental Psychology

The integration of autonomy into developmental psychology marks a shift from its normative philosophical meaning toward a process-oriented understanding of personality formation. Autonomy is no longer viewed solely as a moral attribute but as the result of cognitive maturation, social interaction, and identity development, allowing its analysis across developmental stages and contextual influences.

In Jean Piaget's theory, moral autonomy represents the highest stage of moral judgment. He distinguishes heteronomous morality, based on obedience to authority, from autonomous morality grounded in cooperation and reciprocity, emphasizing that reciprocal respect is the condition of moral autonomy [3]. Children become autonomous when they understand rules as outcomes of mutual agreement, highlighting the role of cognitive development and social relations in moral reasoning.

Erik Erikson complements this view by linking autonomy to identity formation and self-confidence. In the stage of “autonomy versus shame and doubt,” the sense of autonomy arises from experiences of voluntary control over one's actions [4], whereas excessively controlling environments may generate insecurity. Thus, autonomy is both cognitive and psychosocial, grounded in emotional security and supportive relationships.

Lawrence Kohlberg further develops this perspective through his theory of moral reasoning, showing that advanced moral development requires orientation toward internalized principles and critical evaluation of norms. Moral autonomy therefore involves reflective commitment to values rather than mere rule compliance.

Overall, these perspectives converge in viewing autonomy as a developmental construct that emerges gradually through interaction between internal maturation and environmental conditions.

Table 1. Psychological Models of Autonomy Development

Author	Central Dimension	Developmental Mechanism	Educational Implication
Piaget	Cognitive–moral	Social cooperation	Active participation
Erikson	Psychosocial	Confidence and initiative	Supportive climate
Kohlberg	Moral–rational	Internalization of principles	Reflective ethical education

Consequently, in developmental psychology autonomy is conceptualized as a multidimensional process integrating cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions. While Piaget emphasizes intellectual maturation and cooperation, Erikson highlights identity formation and volitional experience, and Kohlberg underscores the development of moral reasoning. The complementarity of these perspectives confirms the complexity of personal autonomy and supports the necessity of an integrative educational approach capable of simultaneously fostering reflection, initiative, and responsibility.

Autonomy in Pedagogy and the Sciences of Education

Within the field of education sciences, personal autonomy acquires a specific meaning, being analyzed not only as a psychological attribute or philosophical principle but as a fundamental outcome of the formative process. Whereas in philosophy autonomy denotes rational self-legislation and in developmental psychology it reflects progressive personality maturation, in pedagogy it becomes an indicator of educational effectiveness and of the degree to which cognitive, affective, and volitional competencies are internalized.

In the tradition of pragmatic pedagogy, John Dewey regards autonomy as the result of active participation in educational experience. He argues that freedom does not consist in the absence of constraint but in the power to participate intelligently in determining the conditions of one's own experience [5]. Education must therefore cultivate individuals capable of independent reflection and responsible decision-making, since its aim is not the transmission of knowledge but the formation of the capacity for continuous learning [5].

Similarly, Maria Montessori develops an educational philosophy centered on independence and self-education, explicitly affirming that independence is the goal of education [6]. The development of autonomy depends on the child's freedom to act within a properly structured environment, as excessive adult intervention may inhibit initiative and responsibility. In this perspective, the educator's role is not to control activity directly but to organize conditions that enable independent learning.

From a critical-pedagogical standpoint, Paulo Freire interprets autonomy as the outcome of awareness and critical reflection on reality, arguing that authentic education must stimulate the learner's capacity to become the subject of one's own formation [8]. Contemporary approaches further associate educational autonomy with self-regulated learning, defined as a process through which learners set goals, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes.

Research literature conceptualizes self-regulated learning as an active process of planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's cognitive behavior, closely correlated with autonomy development and academic achievement. Empirical studies indicate that autonomous learners demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation, persistence, and performance, confirming that autonomy functions not only as a pedagogical ideal but also as a predictor of educational success. Theoretically, autonomy may be interpreted as the result of interaction among three fundamental variables: educational climate; teaching style; structure of learning tasks.

Psychopedagogical research shows that supportive instructional styles promote autonomy, whereas excessive control reduces initiative and individual responsibility [9].

Table 2. Pedagogical Paradigms of Autonomy Development

Paradigm	Representative Author	Conception of Autonomy	Role of Educator	Educational Implications
Pragmatist	Dewey	Autonomy through experience	Facilitator	Active learning
Developmental pedagogy	Montessori	Autonomy through independence	Environment organizer	Self-education
Contemporary pedagogy	Modern theories	Self-regulated autonomy	Reflective guide	Lifelong learning

Comparative analysis demonstrates that regardless of theoretical orientation, autonomy is consistently conceptualized as the result of active participation in one's own formative process. Differences among paradigms concern not the finality but the modality of realization: Dewey emphasizes reflective experience, Montessori highlights structured independence, and contemporary pedagogy stresses self-regulation competencies. The convergence of these perspectives confirms the status of autonomy as a central aim of modern education and is further supported by critical pedagogy, where autonomy is interpreted as the outcome of conscious reflection upon educational experience [8].

Personal Autonomy in Contemporary Motivational Theories

In contemporary psychological and educational literature, personal autonomy is reinterpreted through motivational theories and the paradigm of self-determination, being understood not only as a personality attribute but as a fundamental mechanism of psychological and social functioning. While classical perspectives associated autonomy with moral self-legislation and developmental psychology with personality maturation, current approaches conceptualize it as a basic psychological need and a condition of behavioral self-regulation.

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, defines autonomy as the experience of behavior that is self-initiated and congruent with the self. To be autonomous means to act with a sense of volition and choice [7], implying internalization of values and their integration into personal identity. Autonomy is therefore not equivalent to independence, but to behavioral regulation aligned with the authentic self [7].

Within this framework, autonomy and relatedness are mutually supportive rather than antagonistic, a clarification with important pedagogical implications, as supporting student autonomy promotes responsibility and internalization of norms.

Autonomy is considered one of the three basic psychological needs, alongside competence and relatedness, whose satisfaction leads to optimal functioning and psychological well-being [7]. Supportive educational environments foster intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling contexts tend to inhibit initiative. A key distinction of the theory concerns controlled versus autonomous behavior: the former is driven by pressures, while the latter results from personally endorsed choice, leading to authentic engagement rather than mere compliance [7].

Contemporary research consistently shows that supporting students' autonomy correlates positively with academic performance, persistence, and learning satisfaction. Thus, autonomy functions both as an educational objective and as an explanatory mechanism of learning effectiveness, being closely linked to self-regulated learning, reflexive identity formation, and the capacity to act responsibly in complex social contexts.

Results and Discussion

An Integrative Model of Personal Autonomy

The analysis of the evolution of personal autonomy highlights the need for an integrative theoretical framework capable of synthesizing major conceptual directions identified in the literature. The interdisciplinary complexity of the concept shows that autonomy cannot be explained through a single paradigm but must be understood as the result of interaction among moral, cognitive, affective, and educational dimensions. Such an approach reflects contemporary educational science, which favors multidimensional interpretations over reductive explanatory models. As Dewey noted, education is not preparation for life but life itself [5], and therefore autonomy must be understood within lived experience.

Philosophically, autonomy denotes the subject's capacity for moral self-legislation and responsible decision-making, constituting a foundation of human dignity. Kant emphasizes that the will is autonomous only when independent of external determinants [1]. Psychologically, autonomy results from cognitive maturation and internalization of norms; Piaget shows that children become autonomous when they understand rules as outcomes of mutual agreement [3]. From a psychosocial perspective, Erikson links autonomy to experiences of voluntary control, while Kohlberg demonstrates that advanced moral development requires internalized principles and critical evaluation of norms [4].

Pedagogically, autonomy functions both as an educational goal and as an indicator of formative effectiveness. Montessori argues that independence is the aim of education [6], and contemporary studies confirm that autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation and optimal functioning [7].

These perspectives converge in defining personal autonomy as a multidimensional construct structured along four interdependent axes: moral (internalized principles), cognitive (reflective reasoning), affective–volitional (self-control and competence), and educational (self-regulated learning). Their interaction confirms that autonomy is a systemic construct emerging from the integration of developmental processes and educational influences. Accordingly, the development of autonomy depends on learning contexts that foster reflection, responsible choice, and value internalization.

Conclusion

The analysis of the evolution of the concept of personal autonomy reveals its transformation from a normative philosophical principle into a multidimensional construct of major relevance for developmental psychology and the sciences of education. The theoretical trajectory of the concept demonstrates that autonomy does not constitute an isolated personal trait but rather the outcome of interaction among cognitive maturation, affective experience, value internalization, and educational influences.

Within pedagogical contexts, autonomy emerges as a fundamental goal of education, reflecting the individual's capacity for self-regulation, independent thinking, and responsible decision-making. Contemporary theoretical approaches conceptualize it simultaneously as an indicator of optimal personality functioning and as a prerequisite for self-regulated learning and adaptive social participation.

The convergence of philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives confirms the status of personal autonomy as a key indicator of reflexive maturity and as an essential conceptual reference for the design of modern educational practices. Future research directions may focus on the pedagogical operationalization of the proposed integrative model and its empirical validation in applied educational contexts, thereby contributing to the development of evidence-based strategies for cultivating autonomy in learners across diverse educational settings.

Bibliography:

1. DECI, E. L., RYAN, R. M. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York, Plenum Press, 1985, 371 p.
2. DECI, E. L., RYAN, R. M. *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. New York, Guilford Press, 2017, 756 p.
3. DEWEY, J. *Democracy and Education*. New York, Macmillan, 1916, 434 p.
4. ERIKSON, E. *Childhood and Society*. București, Trei, 2015, 384 p.
5. FREIRE, P. *Pedagogy of Autonomy*. București, Didactică și Pedagogică, 2014, 152 p.
6. GROLNICK, W. S. *The Psychology of Parental Control*. New York, Psychology Press, 2003, 224 p.
7. KANT, I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. București, Editura Științifică, 1999, 154 p.
8. KOHLBERG, L. *Essays on Moral Development*. New York, Harper & Row, 1981, 441 p.
9. MILL, J. S. *On Liberty*. București, Humanitas, 1994, 178 p.
10. MONTESSORI, M. *The Absorbent Mind*. București, Vremea, 2016, 312 p.
11. PIAGET, J. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. București, Didactică și Pedagogică, 1980, 216 p.
12. RYAN, R. M., DECI, E. L. Self-Determination Theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. In: *American Psychologist*. 2000, 55(1), p. 68–78.
13. RYAN, R. M., DECI, E. L. Autonomy and motivation in education. In: *Theory and Research in Education*. 2020, 18(2), p. 133–154.
14. TUGENDHAT, E. *Lectures on Ethics*. București, Humanitas, 2000, 224 p.
15. ZIMMERMAN, B. J. Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. In: *Theory Into Practice*. 2002, 41(2), p. 64–70.
16. ZIMMERMAN, B. J., SCHUNK, D. H. *Self-Regulated Learning and Academic Achievement*. New York, Springer, 2011, 330 p.

Data about author:

Liliana STOICA, PhD student, Doctoral School of Education Sciences, “Ion Creanga” State Pedagogical University of Chișinău, Republic of Moldova.

ORCID: 0009-0002-2384-7135

E-mail: liliana2646@yahoo.com

Presented: 28.02.2026

Reviewed: 30.04.2026

Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026