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Educating for Agency: African Philosophies of Personhood and the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in Education

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ABSTRACT

The global diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) in education presents a profound anthropological and ethical challenge: how to preserve human agency and moral responsibility within increasingly automated learning systems. In African educational contexts, this challenge intersects with long-standing debates about personhood, community, and the moral purpose of education. This paper argues that African philosophies of personhood especially the communitarian ethic of *Ubuntu* offer vital resources for reimagining education in the AI era. Drawing on African philosophical anthropology, Christian theological reflections on the *imago Dei*, and contemporary educational ethics, the study develops a conceptual framework for "educating for agency." This framework emphasizes the formative, relational, and moral dimensions of learning that cannot be replicated by algorithmic systems. Through a critical dialogue between technology and tradition, the paper demonstrates that AI must serve, not substitute, the humanizing goals of education. By integrating African wisdom traditions and ethical reasoning, it concludes that preserving human agency in AI-driven education is not merely a technological adjustment but a moral and cultural imperative for the future of learning in Africa.

KEYWORDS: Artificial intelligence, African philosophy, personhood, Ubuntu, human agency, education ethics, *imago Dei*

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1. Introduction and the African Educational Horizon

The accelerating rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in global education is reshaping the fundamental dynamics of learning, teaching, and formation. Across Africa, universities and schools are beginning to adopt automated systems, adaptive learning technologies, and data-driven administrative tools intended to enhance efficiency and access (Ndung'u & Signé, 2020). Yet this same technological transformation provokes questions about the meaning of education and the preservation of human agency in a world increasingly mediated by machines.

In African societies, education has historically been more than the transmission of knowledge; it has been the formation of moral persons within a communal and spiritual framework (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997). The challenge of AI, therefore, is not merely technological but anthropological: it tests the philosophical and theological foundations of what it means to educate a human being.

Within the Catholic and faith-based educational tradition, education has long been understood as the holistic development of the person created in the image of God and destined for communion with others and with creation (John Paul II, 1990). When automation threatens to reduce learning to data analytics and algorithms, Catholic and African humanisms alike remind educators that the heart of education is moral and relational rather than merely instrumental.

This paper proposes that African philosophies of personhood, particularly the communal ontology expressed in *Ubuntu,* together with the implicit theological vision of human dignity in Catholic education, offer a robust framework for preserving agency and moral responsibility in the age of AI.

1.1 The Crisis of Human Agency in AI-mediated Education

AI technologies increasingly perform cognitive and evaluative tasks once considered uniquely human. Machine-learning models can grade essays, personalize curricula, and even generate feedback that mimics empathic communication. While such systems promise democratization of education, they also risk commodifying learners as data points and teachers as facilitators of algorithmic processes (Selwyn, 2019). In African contexts, where education traditionally integrates moral, social, and spiritual formation, this mechanization of pedagogy threatens to estrange learning from its ethical core (Waghid, 2014). The question is no longer whether AI can teach, but whether it can nurture wisdom, virtue, and community qualities central to African and Christian understandings of personhood.

Human agency, in this context, refers to the capacity of learners and educators to act intentionally, make moral choices, and contribute creatively to their societies. The automation of decision-making and evaluation risks eroding this capacity by outsourcing judgment to algorithmic systems (Coeckelbergh, 2020). From a philosophical-theological standpoint, agency is inseparable from relationality: the self becomes through others, and moral action emerges within community. If AI systems mediate those relationships, they must be scrutinized not only for fairness and efficiency but also for their capacity to sustain relational integrity.

1.2 The African Educational Horizon: Communal and Formative Learning

African indigenous education systems were structured around participation, oral transmission, and moral apprenticeship within community life. Knowledge was not an individual possession but a shared good aimed at maintaining harmony with the living, the dead, and the unborn (Mbiti, 1969). Education thus carried metaphysical and ethical dimensions: to be educated was to know how to live rightly with others and with the divine. Even with the introduction of Western and Christian schooling, this communitarian ethos persisted, shaping what scholars have described as the "moral economy" of African education (Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010).

Within Catholic and faith-based African universities, this horizon finds renewed articulation in the mission of holistic formation. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990) emphasizes that Catholic higher education should integrate faith and reason, cultivate ethical discernment, and form students to serve the common good. When applied to AI, this vision implies that technology must remain subordinate to human flourishing and moral purpose. Education that merely optimizes outcomes without nurturing conscience risks betraying both African and Christian pedagogical ideals.

1.3 Personhood and the Communal Self

African conceptions of personhood diverge sharply from the atomistic individualism implicit in many Western educational technologies. Philosophers such as Menkiti (1984) and Mbiti (1969) argue that personhood is acquired through participation in community: *I am because we are.* The individual becomes a person by fulfilling moral and social obligations that sustain communal life. This relational ontology implies that education should cultivate empathy, cooperation, and moral responsibility rather than merely cognitive competence. AI systems, designed primarily around efficiency and personalization, may inadvertently undermine these communal dimensions by isolating learners in algorithmically curated experiences.

Faith-based institutions in Africa, informed by both Christian personalism and African humanism, are uniquely positioned to critique and reimagine AI from within this relational anthropology. The *imago Dei* doctrine affirms that each person possesses intrinsic dignity, yet this dignity unfolds in relationship with others and with God (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). Thus, Catholic and African perspectives converge on the conviction that education must form relationally capable, morally grounded agents. AI must therefore be evaluated according to whether it enhances or diminishes this vocation.

1.4 The Ethical Horizon of Technology

In African moral philosophy, ethics is inseparable from community welfare and cosmic balance. Knowledge and technology are judged by their contribution to the harmony of life. This resonates with the Catholic principle of the common good, which insists that technological advancement must serve integral human development (Pope Francis, 2015). Consequently, the introduction of AI into African education calls for discernment: does it deepen social participation or exacerbate exclusion? Does it amplify the voice of the poor or silence them through digital inequality?

While automation can extend educational access, it can also reproduce structural injustices if algorithms are trained on biased or decontextualized data (Noble, 2018). African educators, theologians, and policymakers therefore face the dual responsibility of embracing innovation and guarding human dignity. The task is to articulate an African and Christian ethic of AI that resists technological determinism and places moral agency at the center of educational transformation.

1.5 Toward a Relational Ethic of Learning

This emerging ethic requires what can be called *educating for agency*: the intentional formation of learners who can exercise discernment and creativity in digital environments. Such education must combine technical competence with moral wisdom. In African Catholic institutions, this can be pursued through interdisciplinary curricula that unite computer science, philosophy, theology, and social ethics. In broader African systems, it involves revitalizing indigenous pedagogies that privilege dialogue, storytelling, and collective problem-solving. Both approaches affirm that the human mind cannot be reduced to computation and that learning remains a sacred act of becoming.

The following sections will explore how African philosophies of personhood and the implicit theological anthropology of Catholic education provide conceptual and practical resources for sustaining this vision. By retrieving these traditions, African educators can engage AI not as a threat to human agency but as an opportunity to renew the moral and communal foundations of learning.

2. Artificial Intelligence, the Automation of Learning, and African Philosophies of Personhood

The emergence of artificial intelligence as a dominant educational tool raises profound questions about what constitutes knowledge, understanding, and human development. Across many African contexts, the adoption of AI-based systems, adaptive tutoring platforms, predictive analytics, and automated assessment has been embraced as a solution to chronic educational challenges such as teacher shortages, resource scarcity, and uneven access (UNESCO, 2021). Yet, as scholars caution, technological innovation without philosophical grounding risks reproducing dependency rather than empowerment (Mhlambi, 2020). Education in Africa must not simply consume global AI tools; it must interpret and humanize them through its own intellectual and moral traditions.

2.1 The Mechanization of Pedagogy

The automation of pedagogy alters the very texture of learning relationships. AI can now curate personalized learning pathways, monitor student engagement, and predict performance outcomes. In principle, this data-driven personalization appears to enhance efficiency and cater to individual differences. However, it also risks reducing education to algorithmic optimization, a process that quantifies human potential through predictive models rather than nurturing interior freedom and moral growth (Selwyn, 2019).

The automation of learning, therefore, should not be celebrated uncritically. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, Africa's historical experience of colonial epistemologies warns against the unexamined adoption of external systems that shape how Africans think and learn. If AI becomes another vehicle for epistemic colonization, dictating what counts as valid knowledge and who controls it, the continent's quest for authentic liberation through education may be compromised.

Automation's promise is accompanied by a subtle anthropology: it presupposes that cognition can be externalized, measured, and replicated by machines. This assumption is antithetical to both African and Christian visions of personhood. For African cultures, knowing is a relational and experiential act grounded in lived community; for Christian thought, knowledge is an expression of the spirit's participation in truth, not a computational function. When education is reframed as data optimization, learners risk being perceived as "users" of information systems rather than seekers of wisdom. The reduction of learning to metrics erodes the formative, dialogical, and transcendent dimensions of education that are essential to both African communal ethics and Catholic pedagogy.

2.2 Philosophical Anthropology and the African Concept of Personhood

To respond to the dehumanizing tendencies of automation, one must recover the African philosophical understanding of personhood as inherently moral and communal. In contrast to the Western Cartesian emphasis on the autonomous rational subject, African thought conceives the person as a being-in-relation. As Menkiti (1984) famously stated, "The community defines the person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory." Personhood is achieved through social and moral maturation; it is not an innate possession but a lifelong becoming. This understanding provides a rich framework for reimagining education in the age of AI.

The *Ubuntu* philosophy, articulated across Bantu-speaking cultures, encapsulates this view with its foundational maxim: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—a person is a person through other persons (Tutu, 1999). Ubuntu implies that human flourishing arises from reciprocity, empathy, and solidarity. Applied to education, it reorients the goal of learning from self-enhancement to communal well-being. Within this horizon, the automation of pedagogy must be judged not by its technical sophistication but by its capacity to sustain or erode relationships of care and mutual growth. AI that isolates learners, displaces teachers, or fragments communities violates the spirit of Ubuntu.

African personalism also introduces a moral dimension absent from mechanistic models of intelligence. Since personhood is a moral status, education is the process through which one acquires virtues necessary for community life: truthfulness, respect, compassion, and responsibility. These virtues cannot be programmed; they emerge through mentorship, dialogue, and participation in shared practices. AI may simulate dialogue, but it lacks the moral intentionality that grounds genuine human encounter. Thus, African philosophy challenges educators to design and use AI systems that facilitate moral formation rather than mere information transfer.

2.3 The Integration of the Spiritual and the Rational

Another distinctive feature of African thought is its integration of the spiritual and rational dimensions of existence. The African worldview does not dichotomize material and spiritual realities; both are intertwined within the continuum of life (Mbiti, 1969). Education, therefore, is an act of aligning oneself with the moral and spiritual order of the universe. This metaphysical vision contrasts sharply with the secular rationalism that underpins many AI paradigms. Algorithms operate within closed logical systems; they lack transcendence, mystery, and spirit. When AI becomes the organizing principle of education, it risks flattening human experience into calculable patterns, excluding the very dimensions that make learning transformative.

Faith-based African universities embody this integration by affirming that reason and faith are complementary modes of knowing. The Catholic intellectual tradition, articulated in documents such as *Fides et Ratio* (John Paul II, 1998), insists that faith illuminates reason, while reason disciplines faith. In educational contexts, this harmony prevents both the technocratic idolization of reason and the anti-intellectual retreat from modern science. A Catholic university in Africa, therefore, can engage AI critically, embracing its potential for knowledge enhancement while interrogating its anthropological assumptions. The goal is to form graduates who can use technology ethically, creatively, and communally.

2.4 Learning as Participation and Initiation

Traditional African pedagogy is fundamentally participatory and initiatory. Knowledge is transmitted through rituals, storytelling, observation, and apprenticeship within social life. The learner is not a passive recipient but an active participant who internalizes the community's values and wisdom. Such education forms character, not merely competence. It cultivates what Wiredu (1996) calls "moral personhood"—the capacity to act rightly in relation to others. This vision challenges contemporary AI-driven education, which often privileges content acquisition and measurable outcomes over moral and communal formation.

When automation replaces participation with simulation, it deprives learners of the formative struggle through which wisdom emerges. AI tutors may deliver efficient feedback, but they cannot embody the moral authority or communal belonging that traditional teachers represent. In African contexts, the teacher is a moral exemplar and custodian of cultural memory. Catholic educators describe this role as a *vocation*, a participation in God's creative and redemptive work. Replacing this vocation with algorithmic guidance may lead to what theologian Romano Guardini (1956) foresaw as the "loss of the living teacher" the displacement of personal presence by technical mediation.

2.5 The Epistemological Challenge of AI

At a deeper level, AI challenges the epistemological foundations of African and theological traditions. Machine learning constructs knowledge inductively from data correlations, not from metaphysical or moral truths. It operates within what Nicholas Carr (2011) calls "the shallows" of cognition—efficient, associative, but devoid of wisdom. For African education, which values wisdom (*akili*, *nura*, *ubuntu*) as insight into life's interconnectedness, such epistemology is dangerously reductive. Wisdom involves discernment, the integration of knowledge into ethical action, and the capacity to relate information to the moral order of existence. AI can process information but cannot discern meaning.

African theologians such as Bujo (2001) and Magesa (1997) remind us that knowledge without moral grounding leads to social fragmentation. The same warning applies to AI: data without ethical context can perpetuate harm. For instance, predictive analytics used for student assessment may reinforce structural inequalities if based on biased data. A theology of education rooted in African humanism insists that knowledge must serve *life* and the flourishing of persons and communities. Hence, AI must be oriented toward integral human development, not mere computational efficiency.

2.6 The Moral Economy of Digital Learning

The African notion of a "moral economy" provides an ethical lens for evaluating the digital transformation of education. In many African societies, economic and technological activities are morally embedded; they are judged by their contribution to communal well-being. Theologian Laurenti Magesa (1997) defines moral goodness as "that which promotes life." Applied to AI, this criterion implies that educational technologies are good only insofar as they enhance human agency, solidarity, and justice. Systems that commodify students' data or exploit their attention undermine these values. A moral economy of AI-based education would demand transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in algorithmic design.

In Catholic social thought, similar principles are expressed through the concepts of the common good, subsidiarity, and participation (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). The common good requires that technological advancement benefit all members of society; subsidiarity insists that decisions be made at the most local level possible; and participation calls for involving all stakeholders in shaping their educational futures. These principles align with African communal ethics and provide a theological rationale for participatory governance of AI systems in education.

2.7 Preserving Human Agency: A Synthesis

To preserve human agency within AI-mediated learning, African educators must resist two extremes: technological determinism, which overestimates machines' capabilities, and romantic traditionalism, which rejects technological innovation altogether. The challenge is to integrate AI into education in a way that deepens, rather than diminishes, the human capacity for discernment and creativity. African philosophies of personhood, grounded in relationality and moral growth, offer a path forward. They remind educators that the purpose of learning is not to outsmart machines but to become more fully human.

Agency in this sense is not autonomy but responsible participation in a moral community. It involves the freedom to choose the good, the wisdom to discern truth, and the creativity to transform one's environment. When learners are treated as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive consumers of algorithmic content, education reclaims its transformative power. AI, properly humanized, can become an instrument of solidarity rather than alienation.

3. Theological Dimensions of Personhood and the Ethic of Educating for Agency

In the African and Catholic intellectual traditions, education has never been a neutral enterprise. It is an act of moral and spiritual formation, directed toward the realization of human dignity and participation in the divine life. Artificial intelligence, by contrast, embodies a technocratic rationality that tends to separate cognition from conscience and information from wisdom. The tension between these two paradigms, the formative and the functional defines the present educational challenge. If the mechanization of learning proceeds without moral vision, it risks generating technically competent but ethically hollow persons.

This section argues that both African philosophies of personhood and the Catholic understanding of the human being as *imago Dei* provide essential correctives to this trajectory. Together, they articulate a vision of education as the cultivation of agency grounded in moral responsibility, relationality, and transcendence.

3.1 The Theological Anthropology of Education

Catholic theological anthropology conceives education as a participation in God's creative and redemptive work. Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), are endowed with intellect and freedom, which make them co-creators and moral agents in the unfolding of creation (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, para. 1704). This theological premise grounds the dignity of learning: to educate is to awaken in each person the capacity to know, love, and act responsibly. When technology encroaches upon this vocation by automating judgment or externalizing moral decision-making, it undermines not only human autonomy but also humanity's reflection of divine creativity.

From the perspective of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990), Catholic universities are communities of scholars who pursue truth in fidelity to the Church's mission of integral human formation. The aim of education is not to produce efficient workers but virtuous persons capable of contributing to the common good. This vision resonates with African understandings of personhood as relational, moral, and purposive. In both frameworks, human identity is realized through participation: in God's wisdom, in community life, and in the moral order of creation. AI, if uncritically integrated, can disrupt these participatory dimensions by substituting algorithmic mediation for genuine human encounter.

The Church's teaching on technology offers a further interpretive key. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'* (2015), warns against the "technocratic paradigm" that views creation as raw material for manipulation rather than as a gift to be received with reverence. This paradigm, he argues, detaches human action from ethical and spiritual responsibility, leading to ecological and social crises. A similar dynamic unfolds in education when AI systems become ends in themselves rather than tools ordered to human flourishing. The challenge, therefore, is not to reject technology but to convert it to orient it toward integral development grounded in moral discernment and communal purpose.

3.2 African Moral Thought and the Sanctity of Life

African ethical systems, though diverse, share a common orientation toward the preservation and enhancement of life. Theologian Bénézet Bujo (2001) describes African ethics as "ethics of life," in which moral goodness is defined by its capacity to promote harmony among persons, the community, the ancestors, and the divine. Similarly, Magesa (1997) interprets African morality as the practice of *living rightly*—safeguarding the web of relationships that sustain existence. Within this worldview, the misuse of technology that alienates individuals, weakens community, or degrades the environment constitutes a moral violation. Education, therefore, is a sacred enterprise: it teaches how to live in right relationship with all forms of life.

When AI infiltrates educational spaces, it must be evaluated through this moral lens. Does it foster life-giving relationships, or does it generate alienation and dependency? Does it enhance communal wisdom or promote individualistic competition? Does it empower local agency or entrench external control? These questions situate the AI debate within the African ethical horizon and resist the technocratic reduction of education to instrumental outcomes. The moral criterion, as Magesa (1997) insists, is not efficiency but vitality—the flourishing of persons and communities.

3.3 Formation, Conscience, and Discernment

In both African and Catholic perspectives, the moral formation of conscience is central to education. Conscience, as Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) defines it, is the "most secret core and sanctuary of a man, where he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (para. 16). It is the faculty of moral discernment through which human beings recognize their obligations and act freely toward the good. African pedagogies of initiation perform a similar role: they awaken moral consciousness through community rituals, mentorship, and narratives that connect individual action to communal welfare. Both systems aim to produce agents who act responsibly, guided by interior conviction and communal accountability.

AI, however, threatens to externalize this interior moral process by displacing discernment with algorithmic recommendation. Learning analytics that predict student behavior, for instance, can subtly erode the freedom to choose and reflect by pre-structuring educational pathways. When moral agency is replaced by predictive optimization, conscience becomes irrelevant. The task of educators, especially within faith-based African universities, is to reassert the primacy of conscience and discernment in the design and use of AI. Ethical education must teach students not merely how to use algorithms but how to question them—how to engage technology critically in light of moral and spiritual principles.

3.4 The Spirituality of Knowledge

The spirituality of knowledge, a core theme in African and Catholic thought, deepens this reflection. Knowledge is not simply an accumulation of facts but participation in truth, which has both cognitive and moral dimensions. In traditional African societies, the wise person (*mzee wa hekima*) is revered not for possessing information but for embodying understanding and compassion. Similarly, the Catholic intellectual tradition regards knowledge as a participation in the divine Logos truth that liberates and transforms (John 8:32). When AI systems mediate learning, they risk fragmenting this unity of truth and goodness by producing information detached from ethical orientation.

To preserve the spirituality of knowledge, education must integrate contemplation with computation. Learners should be invited to engage technology reflectively, perceiving it as part of a broader moral ecology. This requires what philosopher Bernard Lonergan (1972) calls "self-appropriation," the awareness of one's own cognitive and moral operations. A theology of education informed by African spirituality could cultivate such reflective awareness through practices of dialogue, silence, ritual, and community engagement. In these spaces, technology becomes transparent to the transcendent; it serves rather than supplants human spirit.

3.5 Educating for Agency: A Theological-Ethical Synthesis

To educate for agency in the age of AI is to form persons who can act with freedom, discernment, and solidarity within a technological world. Agency here is not the assertion of autonomy against machines but the exercise of moral creativity in communion with others. Both African and Catholic traditions emphasize that true freedom is relational: it emerges from participation in the moral order of life and the love of God. Thus, education that cultivates agency must combine technical literacy with moral imagination. It must teach students to use AI tools ethically, to critique their biases, and to orient them toward human flourishing.

In this regard, faith-based African universities possess a unique vocation. Their mission is not only to produce employable graduates but also to form moral leaders who can humanize technology. Through interdisciplinary programs that integrate theology, philosophy, computer science, and social ethics, such institutions can pioneer an "integral digital education." This approach would align with Pope Francis's call for an "education alliance" that renews humanity by linking knowledge with care for the earth and the poor (Francis, 2019). It would also resonate with the African ethic of *Ubuntu*, which teaches that technological progress must serve life and community.

3.6 Institutional and Pedagogical Implications

Practically, educating for agency in AI-mediated contexts entails a reconfiguration of curricula and pedagogy. First, ethical reflection on technology must be mainstreamed across disciplines rather than confined to specialized courses. Students in engineering, data science, and education should engage African philosophical texts and Catholic social teaching as part of their intellectual formation. Second, participatory learning models rooted in dialogue and mentorship should be preserved even within digital platforms. Virtual learning environments can incorporate communal projects, service learning, and reflective exercises that maintain the human dimension of education. Third, universities must ensure that AI tools are developed and deployed in ways that respect privacy, equity, and cultural integrity. Policies should reflect both the African moral emphasis on communal welfare and the Catholic principle of the dignity of the human person.

African educational policymakers likewise bear responsibility for crafting regulatory frameworks that balance innovation with ethics. The temptation to adopt foreign technologies without contextual adaptation must be resisted. Instead, African nations can foster homegrown AI research grounded in local values and linguistic diversity. In this way, AI becomes a vehicle of epistemic decolonization rather than recolonization. Faith-based institutions, with their moral credibility and community networks, can lead this movement by modeling responsible innovation.

3.7 The Pedagogy of Solidarity

At the heart of both African and Catholic education lies the pedagogy of solidarity. Solidarity, in the African sense, expresses the interdependence of all life; in Catholic social thought, it denotes the moral commitment to the common good. Both perspectives oppose the individualism and competition that dominate technological cultures. AI-driven education can easily exacerbate these tendencies through personalized learning and data-driven ranking systems. A pedagogy of solidarity reorients education toward cooperation, empathy, and justice.

Faith-based African universities can embody this pedagogy through community engagement, inclusive policies, and advocacy for technological justice. Programs that link AI literacy with social service—such as developing educational technologies for marginalized communities—can transform digital competence into moral vocation. In this sense, the university becomes a workshop of humanity, where technological mastery is inseparable from compassion. As *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI, 2009) affirms, authentic development requires integrating technology with charity, truth, and justice.

4. The Catholic and Faith-Based Educational Vision

Catholic and other faith-based African universities operate from a worldview in which education is not a purely technical or economic process but a **moral and spiritual vocation**. Rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition, this vision understands education as the **integral formation of the human person** intellectually, morally, and spiritually (John Paul II, 1990). The goal of education is not merely to produce employable graduates but to cultivate wise and virtuous persons capable of transforming society in light of truth and the common good.

4.1 Integral Human Formation

According to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the Catholic university exists as a community of scholars dedicated to "the joy of seeking the truth, of discovering it and communicating it" (John Paul II, 1990, §1). Learning, therefore, is inseparable from moral discernment. The learner is not only a rational mind but a moral and spiritual being called to live responsibly before God and others. When AI systems reduce learning to data analytics and outcomes, they risk severing knowledge from wisdom and information from formation. Catholic pedagogy insists that education must form the conscience as much as the intellect.

4.2 Moral Discernment in Technological Culture

Faith-based universities must thus act as spaces of discernment in a technological age. They ask not only *can we use AI?* but *should we, and how?* Pope Francis (2015) in *Laudato Si'* warns against what he calls the **technocratic paradigm,** a mindset that treats technology as neutral and autonomous, detached from ethical reflection. Against this, Catholic thought proposes a **moral humanism** that integrates science, technology, and faith in service to human dignity.

This discernment is not anti-technology; it is pro-human. It insists that technology must serve integral human development, particularly in contexts of poverty, inequality, and cultural fragility that mark many African societies. Thus, when AI enters African education, the first ethical question must be: *Does this technology enhance or diminish the dignity and participation of the human person?*

4.3 Catholic Social Principles and African Communitarian Ethics

The principles of **human dignity**, **the common good**, **solidarity**, and **subsidiarity** provide a moral compass for navigating AI in education.

- **Human dignity** affirms that each learner is a unique and unrepeatable person made in God's image, not reducible to data or metrics.
- **The common good** requires that technological development benefit all, especially the poor and marginalized.
- **Solidarity** invites collaboration and shared responsibility in ensuring equitable access to educational technologies.
- **Subsidiarity** respects local initiative, empowering communities and institutions to decide how to adopt and regulate AI responsibly.

These principles resonate profoundly with African communitarian ethics particularly Ubuntu which also upholds human dignity as relational and social. Both frameworks insist that knowledge and progress must build community rather than fragment it. The convergence of Catholic social teaching and African humanism offers a rich ethical foundation for reimagining AI in education.

4.4. Catholic Universities as Moral Laboratories

Catholic and faith-based universities in Africa can become **moral laboratories** for the responsible integration of technology. They are uniquely positioned to model interdisciplinary inquiry, bringing together theologians, philosophers, data scientists, and educators to reflect critically on AI's impact on human formation. Their mission is to ensure that technological progress remains anchored in truth, justice, and compassion.

Through courses in digital ethics, theology of technology, and African philosophy, students can be formed to see technology not as an autonomous force but as a moral context. This integration of technical excellence and moral wisdom embodies what the Church calls the *service of truth* (*servitium veritatis*).

At the heart of the AI and education debate lies a central question: **who acts and who decides?** In an era where algorithms can predict student behavior, personalize learning pathways, and even assess performance, human decision-making can easily be displaced. Without deliberate intervention, learners risk becoming **passive subjects** of technological processes, and educators may be reduced to technical monitors rather than moral guides.

a. Conceptualizing Agency

Human agency is the capacity to **make intentional choices informed by reason, conscience, and moral insight** (Arendt, 1958). From an African perspective, agency is inherently relational: it emerges within and for the community. Ubuntu teaches that our freedom is exercised responsibly in relationship with others, emphasizing that one's actions have communal consequences (Ramose, 1999).

Catholic anthropology similarly conceives freedom as **participatory and morally oriented**, rather than mere autonomy. True agency is exercised not in isolation but in accordance with truth, love, and the common good (John Paul II, 1993).

b. Threats to Agency in AI Systems

AI in education can unintentionally erode agency in several ways:

1. **Algorithmic pre-determination:** Learning pathways dictated by predictive analytics can limit students' exploratory and creative choices.
2. **Data-driven assessment:** Automated grading and recommendation systems risk reducing students to metrics, overlooking the moral and spiritual dimensions of their development.
3. **Passive engagement:** Personalized interfaces may isolate learners from communal reflection and mentorship, weakening moral and relational formation.

These mechanisms, while efficient, may inadvertently undermine the **ethical formation** that African and Catholic educational frameworks consider essential to true learning.

c. Strategies for Reclaiming Agency

Reclaiming human agency requires intentional **pedagogical, institutional, and ethical interventions**:

1. **Pedagogical Design:** Learning systems must preserve space for reflection, critical thinking, and dialogue. Students should engage in decision-making that shapes their learning paths, ensuring they remain active participants rather than passive recipients.
2. **Teacher as Moral Facilitator:** Educators retain centrality as guides, mentors, and ethical interlocutors. Even in AI-mediated classrooms, human discernment shapes evaluation, feedback, and mentorship.
3. **Curriculum Integration:** Ethical literacy, African philosophy, and Catholic moral teaching should be embedded alongside AI literacy. Students must learn not just to operate technology but to **critically evaluate its social, moral, and communal implications**.
4. **Community-Engaged Learning:** Embedding technology within service learning, cooperative projects, and relational mentorship reinforces the communal dimension of agency, reflecting both Ubuntu and Catholic relational anthropology.

d. The Vision of Co-Agency

Rather than viewing AI as a replacement for human action, African and Catholic educational frameworks advocate for **co-agency**: a collaborative interaction in which humans guide, reflect upon, and direct technological tools in service of moral and intellectual goals.

Co-agency preserves the learner's dignity, cultivates conscience, and strengthens the ethical orientation of technology. It transforms AI from a controlling instrument into a **partner in human formation**, ensuring that automation enhances rather than diminishes the exercise of moral and intellectual freedom.

In this vision, **reclaiming agency is not resistance to innovation**. Instead, it is an ethical and spiritual calibration: ensuring that education remains **an act of freedom, moral reflection, and communal responsibility**, even as technology becomes increasingly sophisticated.

5. **Toward a Relational Pedagogy of Human–AI Co-Agency:** As AI becomes increasingly integrated into African educational systems, the challenge is not to reject technology but to **reimagine pedagogy in ways that preserve human agency, moral formation, and relational learning**. A relational pedagogy of human–AI co-agency positions AI as a **partner to human intelligence**, rather than a substitute for it, ensuring that automation enhances ethical, intellectual, and communal development.

a. Philosophical Foundations

The pedagogy draws upon two converging streams of thought:

1. **African Communitarian Philosophy (Ubuntu):** Ubuntu emphasizes interdependence, relationality, and the moral dimension of personhood. Learning is inherently social, involving dialogue, mentorship, and collective moral responsibility. The purpose of education is to cultivate **responsible agents who participate in the well-being of the community** (Ramose, 1999; Mbiti, 1969).

2. **Catholic Humanistic Anthropology:** Catholic education conceives learning as the **integral formation of the person**, encompassing intellect, conscience, and spiritual maturity (John Paul II, 1990; Francis, 2015). Knowledge is not neutral; it must be integrated with moral discernment and directed toward the common good.

Combining these, co-agency pedagogy asserts that AI can be ethically harnessed if it **supports relationality, reflection, and moral choice** rather than replacing them with automated decision-making.

b. Core Principles of Co-Agency Pedagogy

1. **Human Primacy:** AI is a tool that **amplifies human reasoning** but never overrides human judgment. Teachers remain the moral and intellectual mediators of learning.
2. **Relational Learning:** Students learn through interaction with peers, mentors, and community, even within digital platforms. AI systems should facilitate collaboration rather than isolate learners.
3. **Reflective Engagement:** Technology should create opportunities for reflection and ethical decision-making. Adaptive systems can propose options but must **invite human deliberation** rather than enforce outcomes.
4. **Moral Imagination:** Education should cultivate the capacity to anticipate social and ethical consequences. AI simulations can be used as ethical laboratories, allowing learners to explore moral dilemmas in virtual settings.
5. **Cultural Embeddedness:** AI must respect local epistemologies, languages, and moral frameworks. Digital curricula should integrate African philosophies, oral traditions, and Catholic moral teaching to maintain cultural integrity.

c. Pedagogical Strategies

1. **Narrative and Storytelling:** African pedagogical traditions emphasize the transmission of knowledge and moral insight through **stories, proverbs, and case studies**. AI can enhance these methods by curating culturally relevant materials, preserving local languages, and creating interactive narrative simulations.

2. **Dialogical Learning Platforms:** AI platforms can support **discussion forums, peer review, and ethical debate**, reinforcing critical thinking and moral reflection. The goal is not automated grading alone but fostering moral discernment and co-creation of knowledge.

3. **Mentorship Integration:** AI can assist teachers by providing analytics, feedback, and personalized resources. However, the teacher's role as a **mentor and moral guide** remains central. The technology supplements rather than substitutes relational formation.

4. **Community-Based Projects:** AI can facilitate service-learning and collaborative projects that **connect classrooms to real-world social challenges**, ensuring that digital learning strengthens communal responsibility and practical engagement.

d. Designing for Co-Agency

Co-agency pedagogy requires intentional design of **both technological systems and institutional practices**:

- **Interface Design:** Systems must encourage active choice, reflection, and collaboration. For example, AI tutors could present multiple paths for problem-solving and require students to justify their decisions.
- **Ethical Feedback Loops:** AI should flag potential ethical implications of student or institutional decisions, fostering moral awareness.
- **Human Oversight Structures:** Institutional policies must ensure that final judgment, evaluation, and mentoring remain human-centered.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation:** Systems should integrate local languages, historical contexts, and cultural frameworks to maintain epistemic relevance.

e. Expected Outcomes

A relational pedagogy of human–AI co-agency achieves several interrelated outcomes:

1. **Preservation of Human Agency:** Learners and educators retain the power to make moral and intellectual choices.
2. **Strengthened Moral Formation:** Students develop critical, reflective, and ethical judgment alongside cognitive skills.
3. **Cultural Integrity:** African epistemologies and Catholic moral insights are integrated into AI-mediated learning.
4. **Enhanced Collaboration:** AI supports, rather than replaces, relational, dialogical, and cooperative learning structures.
5. **Responsible Technology Use:** Students learn to engage AI as a tool in service of human flourishing and social good, cultivating digital citizenship.

f. Toward a Continentally Relevant Model

Faith-based African universities are particularly well-positioned to model this approach. By embedding co-agency pedagogy into curricula, teacher formation, and institutional policy, these universities can:

- Provide **guidelines for ethical AI adoption** across the continent;
- Train a generation of leaders capable of **shaping AI in the light of moral and cultural values**;
- Demonstrate how **technological innovation and moral formation** can coexist in African education.

Co-agency pedagogy thus transforms AI from a potential threat to agency into a **moral and intellectual partner** one that enhances rather than diminishes the formation of the human person.

6. **Policy and Institutional Implications:** If African education is to preserve human agency in the age of artificial intelligence, the transformation cannot remain at the level of theory or moral aspiration. It must be translated into **policies, institutional frameworks, and educational practices** that safeguard dignity, promote justice, and cultivate moral wisdom alongside technical excellence.

a. Ethical Frameworks for AI Integration

African governments and higher education regulators must develop **ethical frameworks** for AI adoption that go beyond efficiency and competitiveness. These frameworks should articulate **anthropological principles** rooted in African communitarian ethics and the Catholic vision of human dignity.

For instance:

- **Ethical oversight committees** at national and university levels could review the deployment of AI systems in education especially regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the automation of assessment.
- Policies should require **human-in-the-loop systems**, ensuring that teachers and administrators retain final responsibility for decisions affecting students.
- AI tools should be evaluated not only for accuracy but also for their **pedagogical and moral impact**—whether they promote empathy, cooperation, and justice in learning environments.

These measures reflect Pope Francis' (2020) insistence that technological progress must be governed by ethics and oriented toward the service of humanity rather than profit or control.

b. Formation and Capacity Building

Faith-based and public universities alike must invest in the **formation of digital moral competence** training both educators and students to think critically and ethically about technology. This involves integrating **AI ethics and philosophy of technology** into teacher education, theology, and computer science curricula.

Such formation would cultivate what the Catholic tradition calls *sapientia* wisdom that orders knowledge toward love and the common good. It also echoes the African educational emphasis on moral apprenticeship, where learning is both cognitive and ethical.

At institutional level:

- **Ethics centers** or **AI-and-humanity institutes** could be established within universities to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue among theologians, philosophers, technologists, and educators.
- **Workshops and continuing formation programs** for lecturers should address both technical literacy and ethical discernment, enabling them to accompany students wisely in digital learning environments.
- Catholic and other faith-based universities could collaborate to create a **Pan-African Consortium on AI and Human Formation**, producing shared guidelines and research for the continent.

c. Data Justice and Cultural Sovereignty

African nations must also assert **data sovereignty** the right to govern how data about their students and citizens are collected, stored, and used. Many AI systems in education rely on imported platforms and datasets that reflect foreign cultural assumptions and biases (Noble, 2018).

Policies should therefore ensure:

- **Localization of data** and transparency in algorithmic decision-making;
- **Inclusion of African languages, epistemologies, and moral values** in AI training datasets;
- Partnerships that promote **open-source and context-sensitive technologies** rather than dependence on commercial systems designed for other continents.

This aligns with the theological principle of **subsidiarity**—that decisions should be made at the most local level possible—and with African communal autonomy, ensuring that education reflects the moral and cultural realities of its people.

d. Institutional Mission and Governance

Catholic and faith-based universities can model responsible governance by embedding **AI ethics into their institutional mission statements**. Their governing councils and senates should:

- Adopt **AI ethical charters** grounded in Catholic social teaching and African humanism;
- Establish **AI ethics boards** including philosophers, theologians, data scientists, and student representatives;
- Ensure that institutional digital policies embody the **preferential option for the poor**, using technology to enhance access rather than deepen exclusion.

This approach transforms universities from passive consumers of technology into **moral leaders of digital transformation**. It fulfills their vocation as "laboratories of dialogue between faith and reason" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990).

e. Continental Collaboration and Policy Harmonization

At the continental level, organizations such as the **Association of African Universities (AAU)**, the **Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM)**, and regional education bodies could work toward a **continental charter on AI and education**.

This charter would articulate:

- Shared ethical and humanistic principles for AI integration;
- Mechanisms for joint research and curriculum development;
- Advocacy for inclusive digital infrastructure that bridges the rural–urban divide.

By harmonizing moral vision and policy, Africa can speak with a collective voice in the global conversation on AI ethics offering the world a human-centered alternative shaped by Ubuntu and the Gospel vision of human dignity.

f. Educational Paradigm Renewal

Ultimately, policy and institutional reform must aim at **renewing the paradigm of education itself**. AI should not merely automate old methods but inspire reflection on what it means to be human in a technological age.

African education, with its emphasis on moral character and communal responsibility, has much to offer here. It can remind the world that the purpose of learning is not just the accumulation of knowledge but the formation of conscience and the pursuit of wisdom.

Faith-based institutions, drawing on the Catholic intellectual tradition, can ensure that the **automation of education does not mean the automation of humanity**. Instead, they can witness to a pedagogy of hope where digital innovation coexists with moral formation and where human agency remains the heart of the educational process.

6. Conclusion

The age of artificial intelligence confronts Africa and the world with a fundamental question: will technology serve humanity, or will humanity be reshaped in the image of technology? In education, this question is existential, for education is where societies form their moral selves. African philosophies of personhood and the Catholic vision of integral human formation converge on a single conviction that the purpose of education is to make persons who can act responsibly within community and before God.

AI, when guided by this vision, can become a tool of liberation rather than domination. It can assist in expanding access, preserving culture, and stimulating moral imagination. But without moral vigilance, it risks becoming a mechanism of dehumanization. The task, therefore, is to educate for agency to form agents who can discern, decide, and act for the good even within automated systems.

The African educational heritage, enriched by Catholic and faith-based insights, offers precisely the moral resources needed for this discernment. By reclaiming its own humanistic wisdom, Africa can lead the world in demonstrating that even in the age of intelligent machines, education remains a sacred act of becoming an encounter between persons, guided by reason, love, and the Spirit of life.

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