



HEGEL'S ETHICAL STATE AND THE REALIZATION OF FREEDOM: RETHINKING POLITICAL ETHICS IN THE *PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT*

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Article History:

Submission: November 16, 2025

Revised: April 15, 2026

Accepted: June 15, 2026

Published: June 30, 2026

Keywords: Hegel; Ethical
State; Freedom; Political Ethics;
Democracy.

Kata Kunci: Hegel; Negara
Etis; Kebebasan; Etika Politik;
Demokrasi.

Abstract

The persistent tension between individual freedom, moral responsibility, and the ethical foundations of political institutions raises a fundamental question concerning the role of the state in realizing a free and ethical social order. This study examines Hegel's conception of the state as the actualization of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and explores its implications for contemporary political ethics. The study employs a philosophical–hermeneutic method combining close textual interpretation, dialectical analysis, and contextual reflection on Hegel's account of freedom, ethical life, civil society, and the state. Its novelty lies in interpreting Hegel's ethical state not simply as a theory of political authority, but as a philosophical framework for understanding the institutional conditions under which individual freedom can become ethically substantive. The analysis demonstrates that Hegel rejects both atomistic individualism and the conception of the state as merely an instrument of collective interests. Instead, the state emerges dialectically from the development of family and civil society as the concrete realization of rational freedom and ethical universality. Freedom, therefore, is not equivalent to unrestricted individual autonomy but is realized through participation in rational and ethical institutions. The study argues that Hegel's conception provides a critical resource for rethinking political ethics by reconnecting freedom, institutional responsibility, and the common good, with particular relevance to contemporary democratic life in Indonesia.

Abstrak

Ketegangan antara kebebasan individu, tanggung jawab moral, dan fondasi etis institusi politik memunculkan pertanyaan mendasar mengenai peran negara dalam mewujudkan tatanan sosial yang bebas sekaligus etis. Penelitian ini mengkaji konsepsi Hegel tentang negara sebagai aktualisasi kehidupan etis (*Sittlichkeit*) dalam *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* serta implikasinya bagi etika politik kontemporer. Penelitian menggunakan metode hermeneutika filosofis melalui interpretasi tekstual, analisis dialektis, dan refleksi kontekstual terhadap konsepsi Hegel mengenai kebebasan, kehidupan etis, masyarakat sipil, dan negara. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada penafsiran negara etis Hegel bukan semata-mata sebagai teori tentang otoritas politik, melainkan sebagai kerangka filosofis untuk memahami kondisi institusional yang memungkinkan kebebasan individu memiliki substansi etis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Hegel menolak baik individualisme atomistik maupun pandangan tentang negara sebagai instrumen semata bagi kepentingan kolektif. Negara muncul secara dialektis dari perkembangan keluarga dan masyarakat sipil sebagai aktualisasi konkret kebebasan rasional dan universalitas etis. Dengan demikian, kebebasan tidak identik dengan otonomi individu yang tanpa batas, tetapi terwujud melalui partisipasi dalam institusi yang rasional dan etis. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa konsepsi Hegel menyediakan sumber refleksi kritis untuk menghubungkan kembali kebebasan, tanggung jawab institusional, dan kebaikan bersama dalam etika politik, khususnya dalam kehidupan demokratis kontemporer di Indonesia.



INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of political philosophy, the concept of the state has remained one of the most enduring subjects of philosophical inquiry. From classical Greek philosophy to modern political thought, the state has been understood as the institutional expression of human reason, justice, and communal life. Within this intellectual tradition, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offers a distinctive conception by rejecting the contractualist view that reduces the state to an agreement among individuals and by criticizing forms of liberalism that separate individual freedom from ethical responsibility. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the state is "the actuality of the ethical Idea" (*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*), through which freedom becomes concrete within rational institutions. (Hegel, 1821) Accordingly, the state is understood not merely as an instrument of political authority but as the highest manifestation of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), where individual and universal freedom are reconciled.

Hegel wrote *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* within the political and intellectual context of post-Napoleonic Germany, a period marked by efforts to establish a new political order following the decline of feudal institutions. In this work, he developed a philosophical conception of law and the state grounded in the dialectical development of ethical life, in which social institutions evolve toward the realization of rational freedom. Rejecting the contractualist tradition, Hegel argues that the state is "the actuality of the ethical Idea" (*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*), not an artificial product of individual agreement but the culmination of the historical development of freedom. Hegel wrote *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* within the political and intellectual context of post-Napoleonic Germany, a period marked by efforts to establish a new political order following the decline of feudal institutions. In this work, he developed a philosophical conception of law and the state grounded in the dialectical development of ethical life, in which social institutions evolve toward the realization of rational freedom. Rejecting the contractualist tradition, Hegel argues that the state is "the actuality of the ethical Idea" (*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*), not an artificial product of individual agreement but the culmination of the historical development of freedom. (Hegel, 1821) Central to this conception is *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life), which encompasses the interconnected institutions of the family, civil society, and the state. The family embodies natural ethical unity founded on love and solidarity, civil society mediates particular economic and legal interests, while the state represents the rational synthesis through which individual and universal interests are reconciled.

Hegel's conception of the ethical state remains highly relevant to contemporary political conditions, which are increasingly characterized by declining political morality, extreme individualism, and the dominance of pragmatic interests in public life. In many democratic societies, politics is frequently reduced to competition for power and interests rather than understood as a sphere for realizing ethical responsibility. (Turenko, 2020) From this perspective, Hegel's political philosophy offers an important normative framework for reconsidering the relationship between morality, freedom, and state institutions. By understanding the state as the institutional embodiment of ethical life, Hegel emphasizes that political authority should not merely enforce legal order but also create the conditions in which individual freedom is realized through ethical participation within a rational political community. This perspective provides the philosophical foundation for the present study, which reexamines Hegel's concept of the ethical state in relation to contemporary debates on political ethics.

Accordingly, this research is a qualitative study using Hans –Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic approach. This approach was chosen because Hegel's thought is systematic and dialectical, thus requiring an interpretive method capable of revealing the conceptual meaning embedded in complex philosophical texts. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes understanding through a dialogical relationship between the historical context of the text and the interpreter's present horizon. Accordingly, this approach enables Hegel's concepts of freedom, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), and the state to be interpreted while preserving the coherence and integrity of his philosophical system. (Siswanto, 2024) The primary source of this research is Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which contains the fundamental concepts of the state, law, freedom, and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). This text is analyzed systematically by tracing the dialectical relationship among the family, civil society, and the state as an integrated structure of ethical life. In addition to the primary source, this study also employs secondary literature from Hegelian scholars such as Shlomo Avineri, Allen W. Wood, Charles Taylor, and Robert Pippin to strengthen conceptual understanding and compare various interpretations of Hegel's political philosophy.

The analysis is conducted in three stages. First, textual interpretation is conducted through a close reading of Hegel's key concepts to understand their philosophical meaning. Second, dialectical analysis is employed to reconstruct the logical relationships among these concepts within Hegel's systematic philosophy. Third, contextual reflection examines the relevance of Hegel's conception of the ethical state to contemporary issues of political ethics. This contextual analysis does not reinterpret Hegel's ideas to fit present – day political preferences, but rather places them in dialogue with contemporary realities while preserving the originality and conceptual coherence of Hegel's philosophical thought. Therefore, the validity of this study is based on logical consistency, conceptual rigor, and depth of interpretation rather than empirical verification.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study examines Hegel's conception of the state as the manifestation of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. The analysis focuses on explaining Hegel's understanding of the state as the actuality of ethical life, the dialectical relationship among the family, civil society, and the state, and the relevance of this conception to contemporary discussions of political ethics and the modern state. Accordingly, this paper aims to examine the concept of the state as the manifestation of ethics in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* through a philosophical hermeneutic approach. Specifically, this study seeks to analyze the structure of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in Hegel's political philosophy, explain the state as the rational actualization of ethical life, and evaluate the relevance of Hegel's political thought to contemporary debates on political ethics.

HEGEL: INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY AND MAJOR WORKS

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was one of the most influential philosophers of German Idealism and one of the central figures in the development of modern philosophy. His philosophical system sought to demonstrate the rational structure of reality through the interconnected development of logic, nature, and spirit (*Geist*). Hegel's philosophy was shaped by his engagement with classical Greek philosophy, Christianity, the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, German Idealism, and the political and social transformations associated with the French Revolution. These intellectual and

historical influences became particularly important in the formation of his conceptions of freedom, rationality, history, morality, and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).

Hegel was born in Stuttgart in 1770 and, from 1788 to 1793, studied philosophy and theology at the Tübinger Stift, where he formed important intellectual relationships with Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. During his years in Tübingen, Hegel developed a strong interest in ancient Greek philosophy and the relationship between religion, morality, and human freedom. The intellectual atmosphere of the period was also profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. For Hegel, the revolutionary demand for freedom represented an important historical development, but it also raised a fundamental philosophical problem: how can individual freedom be reconciled with social order, political institutions, and universal ethical principles? This question would remain central throughout the development of his mature political philosophy.

After completing his studies, Hegel worked as a private tutor in Bern and Frankfurt. During this period, he produced several early theological and philosophical manuscripts, including *The Life of Jesus*, *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*, and *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*. Although these writings preceded his mature philosophical system, they reveal his early concern with the relationship between religion, morality, community, and freedom. Hegel increasingly moved away from understanding freedom solely as individual independence and began to explore the possibility of freedom as something realized through ethical and communal forms of life.

Hegel's philosophical development entered a new phase when he joined Schelling at the University of Jena. His early Jena writings, including *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801), demonstrate his engagement with the competing forms of German Idealism developed by Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Schelling. During the Jena period, Hegel developed the dialectical approach that would become one of the defining characteristics of his philosophy. His most important work from this period, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), published in 1807, traces the development of consciousness toward self-consciousness, reason, spirit, and ultimately absolute knowing. The work is significant for political philosophy because it demonstrates that human freedom and self-consciousness emerge through historical, social, and intersubjective processes rather than through isolated individual reflection.

Following the upheavals of the Napoleonic period, Hegel developed his systematic philosophy more fully. His *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*), published in three parts between 1812 and 1816, investigates the fundamental structures and categories of thought and being. For Hegel, logic is not merely a formal instrument used by the human mind; it concerns the rational structures through which reality itself can be comprehended. The dialectical movement of concepts developed in the *Science of Logic* subsequently provides an important methodological foundation for understanding the development of nature and spirit within Hegel's broader philosophical system.

Hegel presented an overview of this systematic philosophy in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, first published in 1817 and subsequently revised. The work organizes his philosophical system into three interconnected domains: the *Science of Logic*, the *Philosophy of Nature*, and the *Philosophy of Spirit*. This systematic structure is important for understanding Hegel's political philosophy because the state belongs to the sphere of objective spirit, where freedom acquires concrete institutional and social expression.

Hegel's mature political philosophy is most explicitly developed in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*), published in 1821. This work

represents the culmination of his reflection on freedom, morality, social institutions, and political authority. Rather than conceiving the state simply as an administrative mechanism or as an institution established through a social contract, Hegel understands it as part of the historical and rational development of freedom. His analysis proceeds through the interconnected stages of abstract right, morality (*Moralität*), and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Ethical life itself is articulated through the institutions of the family, civil society, and the state.

The concept of *Sittlichkeit* is particularly important for understanding Hegel's political thought. Ethical life refers not simply to individual moral conduct but to a socially embodied ethical order in which individuals recognize themselves as free through participation in institutions and relationships that embody shared norms and rational purposes. The family represents an immediate form of ethical unity, civil society represents the differentiated sphere of particular interests and social interaction, while the state represents the higher integration of particular and universal interests. In this framework, the state is not merely an external authority standing above individuals; it is the institutional form through which ethical freedom becomes concrete and universal.

This conception of the state must therefore be understood within Hegel's broader account of freedom. Hegel does not identify freedom with unrestricted individual choice or the absence of external constraints. Rather, genuine freedom involves the capacity of individuals to recognize themselves in rational institutions and to participate in an ethical order that they can regard as their own. The state, at its rational best, therefore provides the institutional conditions through which subjective freedom and universal ethical purposes can be reconciled. This understanding constitutes one of the central contributions of Hegel's political philosophy to debates on the relationship between individual autonomy, morality, social responsibility, and political institutions.

In 1818, Hegel was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin, where he remained until his death in 1831. During his Berlin period, he became one of the most prominent philosophers in Europe and exercised considerable influence on subsequent developments in philosophy, political theory, theology, history, and social thought. His ideas later generated diverse interpretations, ranging from conservative readings that emphasized the rationality of existing political institutions to more critical and revolutionary interpretations associated with the Young Hegelians and, subsequently, Karl Marx (Blasche, 2004).

Taken as a whole, Hegel's major works reveal a continuous development toward a systematic conception of freedom as a historical and institutional achievement. His early theological writings explored the relationship between religion, community, and morality; his Jena works developed the dialectical method and the account of consciousness and spirit; the *Science of Logic* established the conceptual foundations of his system; and the *Philosophy of Right* applied this systematic framework to law, morality, social institutions, and the state. Consequently, Hegel's conception of the state as the actuality of ethical life should not be interpreted in isolation from his broader philosophical system. It represents the culmination of a philosophical trajectory in which freedom progressively moves from an abstract principle toward concrete realization in ethical and political institutions.

This intellectual trajectory provides the conceptual foundation for examining Hegel's ethical state and its relationship to the realization of freedom. His political philosophy raises a question that remains relevant to contemporary political ethics: whether freedom can be adequately sustained through individual autonomy alone, or whether it requires ethical institutions capable of reconciling individual interests with universal responsibility

and the common good. In this sense, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* offers not merely a theory of the state but a philosophical framework for reconsidering the relationship between freedom, ethical responsibility, and political institutions in modern society (Yawan, 2007, n.d.).

BASIC CONCEPTS OF HEGEL'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Hegel's political thought is rooted in his attempt to understand the state as the highest form of human rationality and ethical life. Within the framework of his philosophical system, the state is not the result of a social agreement or a mere construction of power, but rather the concrete realization of freedom that has become self – conscious. To understand this, it is important first to explore the conceptual foundations of Hegel's political philosophy, which rests on two main ideas: first, the relationship between rationality and reality, formulated in the principle "the rational is the real, and the real is the rational"; and second, the dialectical dynamics that drive the actualization of ethical ideas in history and the structure of social life (Akbar & Yuwono, 2025). These two ideas form the basis of Hegel's entire system of thought on the state, law, and morality, and are the key to understanding how human freedom finds concrete form in a rational ethical order.

Rationality and Reality (*Wirklichkeit*)

One of Hegel's most famous statements in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* is that "the rational is the real, and the real is the rational." This statement is often misunderstood as a justification for the political status quo, as if Hegel wanted to say that everything that exists is true and must be accepted as it is. (Hegel, 1991) However, in a deeper philosophical reading, this statement actually states a dialectical relationship between ideas and reality, between rationality and historical existence.

For Hegel, reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is not merely empirical existence (*Dasein*), but rather an existence that contains rationality within itself. Something is real if it contains a rational principle that corresponds to a universal idea. Thus, not everything that exists is real in the Hegelian sense; only that which fully expresses rationality can be called real. (Basuki et al., 2023) Rationality in this context refers to the ideal form that forms the basis for moral, legal, and political order. Hegel rejected the empiricist and mechanistic views of politics, which view the state as merely the result of historical chance or a social contract. For Hegel, the state is the realization of rational freedom.

In the state, the idea of freedom takes concrete form, realized through law and social institutions. Therefore, "the rational is the real" means that a state structure that truly reflects human moral rationality is a true state, not merely a factual government. (Rahman & Simbolon, 2024) The author observes that for Hegel, freedom is not merely freedom from coercion, but rather the freedom to participate in ethical life. True freedom is only possible if individuals live within a social system that recognizes and embodies universal rationality. A rational state is not one that imposes an absolute will, but rather one that becomes a concrete manifestation of a shared rational will. In this sense, rationality and reality are united in an ethical order, where law and political institutions are expressions of self – conscious freedom.

Furthermore, Hegel's statement also represents a rebuttal to the Kantian dualism between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. Hegel rejected the view that reason and reality exist in two separate realms. In his system, rationality must find its form in historical reality. Ideas lacking actual form are merely abstractions, while reality without rationality

is merely accidental. (Yuni Pangestutiani, 2020) Therefore, the task of political philosophy is to understand how the rational idea of freedom is actualized in a concrete form of ethical life namely, the state. This is the main strength of Hegel's political thought. He does not stop at the level of subjective morality, but rather brings rationality into social and political structures. Rationality is no longer the preserve of the meditating individual, but becomes the objective spirit (*objektiver Geist*) that governs communal life. (Muthhar, 2016.Pdf, n.d.) In this way, Hegel combines ethics and politics into one systematic whole: the state as the actuality of the ethical idea.

Dialectics and Actualization of Ethical Ideas

For Hegel, all reality develops through dialectical movement. Dialectics is not simply a method of thinking, but an ontological law that animates all things. Every form of reality contains internal contradictions that drive it toward a new, higher synthesis. In the context of political philosophy, this dialectic explains how human freedom and ethics develop from the simplest stages to their perfect form in the state. (Falah et al., 2022) In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel outlines the development of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) through three stages: the family, civil society, and the state. These three form a progressive dialectic from particularity to universalism. The family is the most natural and direct form of ethics, where individuals are united in love and solidarity. However, in civil society, this unity is shattered by the particularities of individual interests. This is where law, economics, and instrumental contractual relations emerge. (Hegel, 2018) The dialectic between love (family) and personal interests (civil society) then finds its synthesis in the state, which becomes the rational form of ethical life.

For Hegel, the state is not the negation of individual freedom, but rather the culmination of freedom itself. Through law, institutions, and political participation, the individual does not lose himself, but finds himself as part of a rational totality. In the state, the particular will of the individual is reconciled with the universal will. This is what Hegel meant by the "actualization of the ethical idea": freedom, previously subjective, becomes objective through rational institutional structures. (Permata, 2011) Hegel's dialectic is not a linear movement, but rather a reflective one in which each stage contains and transcends the previous one. The family does not disappear in civil society, and civil society does not disappear in the state. The three interpenetrate and complement each other in the unity of ethical life. The true state, therefore, is not merely political power but the highest expression of moral life. In it, individuals live not merely as legal subjects but as ethical citizens (*sittliches Wesen*) aware of universal rationality.

Despite its profound influence on modern political philosophy, Hegel's conception of the state has also been the subject of significant criticism. Some scholars argue that his emphasis on the rational authority of the state may be interpreted as legitimizing excessive state power and limiting individual autonomy. Nevertheless, Hegel's intention was not to justify authoritarianism but to demonstrate that the state attains legitimacy only insofar as it embodies rationality, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), and the realization of concrete freedom. From this perspective, the ethical state should be understood not as an instrument of domination but as the institutional expression of the reconciliation between individual and universal freedom.

Hegel's dialectic also has a historical dimension. Ethical ideas do not emerge suddenly, but through a long historical process in which the human spirit (*Geist*) learns to recognize its freedom. Every historical form of state, from the Greek polis to the modern constitutional monarchy, represents a moment in the spirit's journey toward its self-actualization. In this sense, world history for Hegel is a "world court," where the idea of

freedom is tested and realized through human action and social institutions. (Wang & Liu, 2025) This concept emphasizes that the state is not merely a legal entity, but also a moral symbol of the advancement of human consciousness. When the state implements laws and governance according to the principles of rationality, it not only maintains order but also actualizes universal ethical ideas. Conversely, if the state suppresses freedom and ignores rationality, it loses its essence as a concrete manifestation of ethical ideas. Thus, the state can be normatively assessed by the extent to which it reflects ethical rationality itself.

Through the framework of dialectics and the actualization of ethical ideas, Hegel combines two main dimensions of political philosophy: ontological and normative. Ontological because the state is a concrete form of the idea of freedom that has developed historically; normative because the state must continuously strive to realize a rational ethical life. This is where Hegel's thought is relevant to the modern world. In a situation where politics is often separated from ethics, Hegel's thought reminds us that true rationality cannot be separated from morality. The state can only be called rational if it is also ethical; and ethical life can only be realized if it takes rational form in political institutions. For Hegel, political philosophy is not a reflection on power, but on the rational actuality of human freedom. Rationality and reality, dialectics and ethics, all combine in the idea of the state as the pinnacle of moral life. By understanding the state as a manifestation of ethical ideas, (Holsclaw, 2016) Hegel taught that true politics is not merely a matter of law and administration, but part of the human process of recognizing and realizing one's freedom in a rational order.

THE STRUCTURE OF ETHICAL LIFE (*SITTlichkeit*)

In Hegel's philosophical system, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is the highest stage in the development of the objective spirit (*objektiver Geist*). Through this concept, Hegel attempts to show how individual freedom finds its concrete form in a rational social order. *Sittlichkeit* is not merely personal morality or external norms, but rather a structure of life in which the individual will and the universal will are harmoniously combined. In *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes ethical life as a concrete unity between subjective freedom and objective order, manifested in three institutional forms: the family, civil society, and the state. (Hegel, 1821) These three form a dialectical totality, in which each stage contains, negates, and synthesizes the previous stage towards the full actualization of the ethical idea.

Family: Natural Unity and Love

According to Hegel, the first stage in ethical life is the family. For Hegel, the family is the most natural and spontaneous form of ethics. It precedes civil society and the state because in it the individual does not yet appear as a separate entity, but rather as part of an organic unity based on love (*Liebe*). Love in this context is not merely a subjective emotion, but rather the unification of individual wills into a moral totality. In the family, the individual abandons his ego and finds himself in communion with others especially in the relationships of husband and wife and parent and child. (Dumbliauskas, 2024) Hegel placed the family at the foundation of ethical life because it represents the initial form of the union between particularity and universality. Family relationships are based on trust, not contract; on mutual recognition, not formal law. Therefore, the family has a unique moral character; it is an ethical form born of natural necessity, yet at the same time rational

in its structure. In love, the particular will finds itself within a larger will; freedom becomes concrete in solidarity.

However, Hegel also emphasized that the family, while ethical, is limited. It is a natural entity that must ultimately dissolve so that the individual can enter broader social life. The dissolution of the family (for example, when children become adults and independent) is a dialectical moment that paves the way for civil society. Thus, the family does not negate individual freedom, but rather becomes the basis for the formation of an ethical subject capable of living rationally within society. (Kyiv & Riabokon, 2025) In the modern context, Hegel's views on the family hold significant moral relevance. The family is not only a social institution, but also the primary setting for the formation of ethical awareness and human solidarity. Without ethical experiences within the family, individuals find it difficult to grasp the broader meaning of freedom. The family thus becomes the moral foundation for the entire structure of ethical life.

Civil Society: Particular Interests and Formal Law

The second stage of ethical life is civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). In this stage, the natural unity of the family breaks down into a complex network of economic, legal, and social relationships. Individuals no longer unite directly with others but instead exist as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests. (Blasche, 2004) This is where Hegel describes civil society as the "state of necessity and reason" (*System der Bedürfnisse und des Verstandes*). For Hegel, civil society is the arena in which human particularity manifests itself. Individuals act based on the impulses of need, ownership, and self-interest. However, through economic and legal mechanisms, these particular interests indirectly contribute to the common good. Civil society is a space for work, exchange, and regulation a place where individuals exercise their freedom in the form of external, contractual relationships. (Donetsk Law Institute Kryvyi Rih & Turenko, 2020) Civil society is the first rationalization stage of human freedom. While in the family the individual is still bound by natural love, in civil society the individual learns to establish himself as an autonomous legal subject. Hegel emphasized the importance of formal law (*Recht*) in maintaining this freedom. Law mediates between the will of the particular individual and the broader social order. Without law, civil society would descend into an anarchy of interests; but law without ethics would give rise to a dry formalism.

In civil society, economic and corporate institutions also emerge, which, according to Hegel, serve to balance social inequality. Although each individual acts in their own self-interest, market mechanisms and work systems demand cooperation and interdependence. Hegel called this a form of objective rationality in civil society. Rationality here does not mean pure morality, but rather a logical order that allows particularities to exist without destroying the general order. However, civil society remains an imperfect stage. It is full of contradictions: between freedom and inequality, between rights and interests, between law and morality. (Dortsev, 2025) This dialectic demands a higher unification—a form of life in which personal interests and universal will can be united without mutual exclusion. This synthesis is found in the state, which is the highest stage of *Sittlichkeit*. In Hegel's view, civil society is a school of freedom. It is here that humans learn to live as independent individuals, recognize their rights, and interact within a rational system. (Hegel, 1821) However, freedom at this stage remains external, not yet integrated with ethical awareness. Therefore, civil society requires a higher ethical foundation to avoid becoming trapped in legal formalism and economic egoism. The state exists to reunite these particularities into a rational totality.

State: Rational Universal Unity

For Hegel, the state is the pinnacle of ethical life and the highest actualization of the rational idea. It is not simply a political institution, but rather the concrete expression of the objective spirit that has attained its own consciousness. In the state, the individual will and the universal will are united in a rational unity. Therefore, Hegel called the state "the actuality of the ethical idea" (*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*). The state is not an artificial social contract, but rather the result of the historical development of freedom. Hegel rejected the views of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, who saw the state as the result of an agreement between individuals. For Hegel, the state arose from the rational need of the spirit to realize freedom in an objective form. The state is a living ethical organism, not a machine of power. In the state, law, morality, and freedom are synthesized into a rational order that maintains a balance between the individual and the community. (Green, 2022) This view is Hegel's attempt to assert that true freedom is impossible outside the state. Within the state, individual freedom becomes concrete because it is regulated and guaranteed by rational law. State law is not external coercion, but rather a manifestation of the collective rational will. By obeying the law, individuals do not lose their freedom; rather, they participate in universal freedom.

Hegel's state structure consists of three main elements: the constitution, the government, and the political community (civil servants and the king). These three complement each other in an organic unity. The constitution guarantees the principle of rationality; the government carries out concrete executive functions; and the king serves as a symbol of the state's unity. Hegel rejected absolutism but also criticized liberal democracy for overemphasizing the will of the majority. A rational state must balance individual freedom with universal interests through a rational system of laws and institutions. (Horstmann, 2004) Hegel's view of the state possesses an ethical depth rarely found in modern political theory. The state is not simply a vessel of power, but a field for the actualization of human morality. By participating in the state, individuals not only obey the law but also actualize their freedom in rational form. In this sense, the state becomes a reflection of the spirit that has attained the highest moral consciousness. Furthermore, Hegel emphasized that the state has both historical and spiritual dimensions. It is not a static entity, but rather the product of the development of human consciousness throughout history. Each historical form of government is a moment in the spirit's journey toward more perfect freedom. Therefore, for Hegel, world political history is the history of the realization of freedom. (Caruso, 2025) The modern state, with its rational legal system and constitution, became the stage where ethical ideas reached their actuality.

However, Hegel's concept of the state is often misunderstood as totalitarian. This criticism arises because Hegel positions the state as the highest manifestation of objective spirit, as if the individual were dissolved within it. However, when read hermeneutically, Hegel does not negate the individual, but rather asserts that individuals can only become free through participation in an ethical order. A true state does not oppress, but mediates; it does not eliminate personal freedom, but elevates it to the level of the universal. The state becomes a synthesis of family and civil society: it embodies the love and solidarity of the family, as well as the rationality and freedom of civil society. In the state, particularity and universality are no longer opposed, but interpenetrate. The state is the home of a freedom that is conscious of itself an ethical freedom, not anarchic.

From the above description, the author concludes that the structure of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in Hegel's philosophy is a system that displays a logical progression from freedom to moral rationality. The family represents a natural, loving unity; civil society expresses particularity governed by law; while the state becomes a universal, rational

unity where freedom reaches its actuality. The three are not separate entities, but stages in the dialectic of human ethical life. By understanding the structure of *Sittlichkeit*, we can see that for Hegel, ethics does not stand apart from politics. The state is not merely an instrument of power, but a concrete form of human moral rationality. (Akbar & Adhimas Alifian Yuwono, 2025) In the modern context, this thought reminds us that state building involves not only law and economics, but also the establishment of an ethical order that guarantees the freedom of each individual within the framework of universal rationality.

THE STATE AS A MANIFESTATION OF ETHICS (*SITTlichkeit*)

In Hegel's entire system of political philosophy, the state occupies a paramount position as the highest form of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Through the state, the rational idea of freedom finds concrete realization in the social and political order. For Hegel, the state is not simply an administrative structure or the result of a social contract, but rather the actual manifestation of the ethical idea—the place where freedom, law, and morality are combined in a rational unity. (Hegel, 1821) This view stems from the understanding that human freedom cannot be realized solely in the subjective realm or in contractual relationships between individuals, but must find objective form in rational and ethical social institutions. Thus, the state becomes the highest expression of the objective spirit (*objektiver Geist*) that recognizes itself as living freedom.

The State as the Highest Form of Ethical Life

In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel wrote that "The State is the actuality of the ethical idea the real ethical spirit, the substantive will conscious of itself, thinking, and knowing itself." (Hegel, 1821) This sentence shows that for Hegel, the state is not merely a political institution, but also a moral and spiritual reality. It is a concrete unity between subjective freedom and universal will. All forms of ethical life family and civil society—find their completion in the state, for only within the state does freedom achieve its full actuality. For Hegel, ethical life develops dialectically. The family provides natural unity, civil society represents rational particularity, and the state becomes the synthesis that unites the two in a universal unity. The state is the culmination of the journey of human freedom from the natural to the rational. (Donetsk Law Institute Kryvyi Rih & Turenko, 2020) In the family, freedom is emotional and intuitive; in civil society, freedom appears in formal and particular forms; while in the state, freedom becomes substantively real because it is united by legal rationality and universal morality.

Thus, the state is not only a container for individuals, but also an expression of the highest moral consciousness. The state accommodates and organizes human social relations in a rational form, where each individual lives not only for himself, but also for the universal good. Within the state, the individual will participates in the general will without losing its freedom. Hegel called this state the highest form of concrete freedom (*konkrete Freiheit*), because freedom is no longer understood as negative freedom (freedom from something), but rather positive freedom (freedom to realize oneself in a rational order). (Donetsk Law Institute Kryvyi Rih & Turenko, 2020)

The State is Not the Result of a Social Contract, but the Result of the Development of Rational Dialectics

One of the most important aspects of Hegel's political philosophy was his rejection of the social contract theory. He argued that the views put forward by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau overly presupposed individuals as separate entities who then externally formed agreements to establish the state. In these views, the state arose from particular wills, not

from a higher rational principle. As a result, the state was understood mechanistically and instrumentally, rather than as a living ethical organism. Hegel argued the opposite: the state was not the result of a contract, but rather the historical and dialectical development of the human spirit. The state arose not from an artificial agreement, but from rational necessity (*vernünftige Notwendigkeit*). In the historical process, the human spirit struggled to recognize its freedom, and this struggle led to the formation of institutions that objectively realized freedom. The state was the stage at which freedom became conscious of itself. (Kelley, 2001)

The author believes that by rejecting the social contract theory, Hegel sought to restore the ethical and historical dimensions of the state. The state cannot be understood as merely a tool for protecting individual rights, because these rights themselves only have meaning within the framework of ethical life. The state is the result of a dialectic between particularity and universality: between individual will and the general order, between subjective freedom and objective rationality.

Secara dialektis, perkembangan ini dapat dijelaskan sebagai berikut:

- 1) In the family, individuals are immersed in emotional unity; freedom is still not reflective.
- 2) In civil society, individuals become aware of their freedom, but in a particular and egoistic form.
- 3) In the state, the contradiction between particularity and universalism is overcome; the individual realizes that his freedom is only possible within the framework of rational laws and institutions that regulate communal life.

Thus, the state is not the result of a compromise between individual interests, but the result of a rational dialectical process that leads to a higher moral unity. Within this framework, state law is not a limitation on freedom, but a condition for the realization of concrete freedom. Hegel even asserted that "The state is the concrete reality of freedom; in the state, freedom takes its form." (Donetsk Law Institute Kryvyi Rih & Turenko, 2020) Hegel's view provides a sharp critique of modern liberalism, which often separates freedom from moral community. True freedom, according to Hegel, cannot stand on the foundation of atomistic individualism. Without a rational ethical life, freedom becomes nihilistic and destructive. The state, as a result of the development of rational dialectics, returns freedom to its ethical form a freedom that is aware of its obligations to others.

The Ethical Function of the State as a Guarantor of Concrete Freedom

Hegel rejected the view that the state is an instrument of external power that subjugates individuals. Instead, the state functions as a guarantor of concrete freedom. Within the state, law, morality, and individual will are united in a rational system that allows each person to live their life freely, yet in harmony with the general order. (Adjei, 2024) The ethical function of the state is a form of actualization of the principle of rationality in social life. An ethical state does not impose morality from the outside, but creates conditions in which moral freedom can be consciously exercised. In a rational state, law becomes not an instrument of oppression, but rather a means of moral education. Individuals learn to understand that obeying the law means acknowledging a higher rationality—a rationality that they themselves, as rational beings, share.

Within this framework, state law holds a special position. For Hegel, law is not simply a collection of rules, but an objective form of free will. Law makes freedom concrete because it provides limits and direction for human action. Without law, freedom would be trapped in uncontrolled subjectivity. With law, freedom becomes rational and can be realized socially. In addition to law, government and political institutions also have an

ethical function. Hegel emphasized the importance of the constitution as a form of state rationality. The constitution regulates the logical division of power and places each state organ in functional balance. The government must not be arbitrary but must act in accordance with universally recognized rational principles. In this regard, Hegel viewed constitutional monarchy as the most rational form of the modern state—not because it deifies the king, but because it is able to unite the universal will with a symbol of national unity. (Rabanos, 2022)

In Hegel's thought, the ethical function of the state can be explained through three main dimensions:

1. Normative dimension, namely the state as a rational and just determinant of law. In Hegel's view, the legitimacy of the state rests on its ability to establish laws that express universal rationality and embody ethical principles rather than merely protecting particular interests.
2. Educational dimension, namely the state as a space for forming citizens' moral awareness through ethical participation. Through institutions such as the family, civil society, and public life, the state cultivates ethical consciousness, enabling individuals to recognize their responsibilities as members of a rational political community.
3. Spiritual dimension, namely the state as the highest expression of the human spirit that becomes conscious of its freedom. The state represents the culmination of the historical development of *Geist*, where individual freedom is reconciled with universal ethical life and realized through rational political institutions.

These three dimensions demonstrate that, for Hegel, the state is not a neutral entity but a living ethical institution. Its function extends beyond the enforcement of law to the cultivation of citizens' ethical consciousness through participation in rational institutions. Thus, the state not only maintains social order but also provides the conditions for the realization of human morality and freedom. Furthermore, Hegel argues that individuals attain their true freedom precisely through participation in the ethical life of the state. Political participation is therefore not merely a legal right but an ethical activity through which individuals recognize themselves as members of a universal ethical community. In this sense, the state functions as the institutional sphere in which subjective freedom is reconciled with objective freedom. (Hegel, 2018)

From the above description, the author concludes that the concept of the state in Hegel's political philosophy cannot be understood reductively as a tool of power, but rather as a concrete manifestation of ethics. The state is the highest form of ethical life because in it subjective freedom and universal will are combined in a rational unity. It is not the result of a social contract, but the result of the rational dialectical development of the human spirit in history. Through the state, rationality becomes a reality, and freedom finds its objective form.

According to Hegel, the ethical function of the state is to guarantee concrete freedom through laws, institutions, and the moral participation of its citizens. A rational state is not one that coerces, but one that educates; not one that oppresses, but one that upholds freedom through legal rationality. Within this framework, the state becomes a space where individuals recognize themselves as part of a moral totality, free beings acting according to universal reason. This idea holds great significance for reflection on modern political philosophy. Amidst the current crisis of ethics and political individualism, Hegel's ideas reaffirm the need to restore the moral dimension to state life. (Lobovikov, 2022) The state, in the Hegelian sense, cannot be separated from ethics; it is ethics made real. Therefore, the task of philosophy and politics is not to oppose freedom to order, but rather to find a

way for the two to unite in a living, rational unity. Only then can the state become a reflection of true ethical rationality, a home for conscious and civilized human freedom.

THE RELEVANCE OF HEGEL'S THOUGHT FOR THE MODERN STATE

Hegel's political thought, although born in the early 19th century, remains remarkably vibrant in understanding the dynamics of modern statehood and politics. Amidst a crisis of confidence in political institutions, the rise of extreme individualism, and the decline of public ethics, reflection on Hegel's idea of the state as a manifestation of ethics becomes increasingly important. Hegel taught that the state is not merely an arena for the struggle for power or a forum for individual interests, but the highest form of rational, moral life. (Hegel, 1821) In a modern context, this thinking challenges atomistic liberal views and offers a philosophical basis for upholding a solid public morality. Furthermore, Hegel's thought can be creatively reinterpreted to enrich Indonesian democratic discourse, which is still struggling to find a balance between individual freedom, social solidarity, and collective moral responsibility.

Critique of Atomistic Liberalism and Extreme Individualism

One of the most incisive aspects of Hegel's political philosophy is his critique of the individualism that underlies modern liberalism. Hegel argued that the liberal view, as formulated by Hobbes, Locke, and some Enlightenment thinkers, overemphasized the freedom of the individual separate from his or her moral community. Within the framework of atomistic liberalism, the individual is seen as an autonomous entity, possessing natural rights prior to the formation of society or the state. (Ferro, 2025) In this view, the state is merely a tool to protect individual rights. Hegel rejected this view because, for him, humans never exist as separate atoms. Humans are always situated within a network of social, historical, and ethical relations. An individual's personality is formed through interaction with others, and their awareness of freedom emerges within the context of a moral community. In other words, true freedom cannot be realized in isolation, but rather in a rational, communal life. Hegel's critique is highly relevant in responding to the phenomenon of extreme individualism in modern society. In many contexts, freedom is often understood negatively as "the right not to be governed" or "freedom from constraints." As a result, moral orientation and social responsibility are neglected. Hegel reminds us that true freedom is not a freedom that rejects constraints, but rather a freedom that finds its meaning in relationships with others and with a rational order.

Atomistic liberalism tends to separate the individual from the state, while for Hegel, the state is precisely the condition that enables the individual to be truly free. Without a rational ethical order, freedom will degenerate into moral anarchy or the domination of economic power. Hegel's critique of liberalism is not a rejection of freedom itself but of an understanding of freedom detached from its ethical dimension. In today's global society, Hegel's critique is increasingly relevant. Neoliberal capitalism, with its logic of free competition and individual self-interest, often erodes a sense of solidarity and social responsibility. (Yuni Pangestutiani, 2020) Politics also tends to be reduced to a struggle for interests, rather than an arena for the actualization of public morality. In this context, Hegel's idea of concrete freedom offers a profound correction: true freedom can only be realized if it is based on the principles of rationality and a shared ethical life. Thus, Hegel teaches that freedom cannot be separated from moral community. Individual independence does not mean a rejection of the social order, but rather an awareness that a rational social order allows individuals to develop fully. The state, in the Hegelian sense, is the condition of freedom itself, not a threat to it.

Implications for Political Morality and Public Ethics

The concept of the state as a manifestation of ethics has major implications for understanding political morality and public ethics. Hegel rejected the view that separates politics and morality. For Hegel, politics is the realm where universal morality takes concrete form through law and state institutions. Thus, political action cannot be separated from its ethical dimension; a true state is one that functions morally. This concept provides an important basis for assessing the moral quality of modern political practice. (Baumann, 2011) True politics is not merely the management of power, but also the effort to realize rational and moral values in social life. Within the Hegelian framework, political morality is not subjective, but objectively embodied in rational laws, just government, and the participation of citizens who are aware of their ethical responsibilities.

Public ethics, in Hegel's view, stems from an awareness of the unity between personal freedom and the public interest. In a rational state, individuals do not feel that the public interest is coerced into them, because they see themselves as part of a moral totality. Therefore, Hegel rejects the dichotomy between the individual and the state, between personal morality and political morality. Public ethics arises when individuals internalize the rationality of the state and make it the principle of their actions. (Organization et al., 2025) In the contemporary context, this thinking has major implications for efforts to build a government with integrity and ethics. Ethical politics cannot be born from a system solely oriented towards power, but must be based on the principle of moral rationality. Hegel emphasized the importance of state institutions as a means of moral education for its citizens (*Erziehung des Volkes*). Through just laws and institutions, the state fosters a higher moral awareness in individuals. This concept aligns with the needs of modern society, which is facing a crisis of public morality. Corruption, abuse of power, and the loss of trust in state institutions are signs of a disconnect between politics and ethics. Within the Hegelian framework, this crisis occurs when the state fails to function as a rational space for the actualization of ethics. The state loses its spirit as a "real ethical idea" and becomes a mere bureaucratic instrument or a tool of domination by certain groups. Therefore, Hegel offers a moral vision for modern politics: the state must become a forum for the formation of public virtue. (Jiantao, 2025) Rational and moral citizens are not born spontaneously, but rather through education, law, and informed political participation. Public ethics is not simply a matter of personal morality, but the result of a rational social structure.

Thus, the implications of Hegel's thought for modern political morality can be formulated in three main points:

- 1) Politics must have an ethical foundation, not just a technocratic one.
- 2) The state must function as a medium for moral education, not merely an administrative regulator.
- 3) Individual freedom and the public interest must be united in a rational order that allows public ethics to grow. (O'Brien, 2013)

The Opportunity for Reinterpreting Hegel in the Context of Indonesian Democracy

Hegel's thought, although born in the context of 19th-century Europe, has great potential for reinterpretation in the context of Indonesian democracy. Indonesia faces serious challenges in building a democratic state that remains ethically grounded. On the one hand, democracy demands recognition of individual freedom; on the other, this freedom is often trapped in individualism and political pragmatism that ignore moral responsibility. (Prasetyo & Nugraha, 2025) Hegel's ideas can be a source of inspiration for the development of ethical democracy, a model of democracy that emphasizes not only

political procedures but also the moral dimension of freedom. In ethical democracy, citizen freedom is understood not only as political rights but also as a responsibility to participate in communal life rationally and morally.

First, Hegel's principles of rationality and reality can help strengthen the ethical foundations of Indonesian law and the constitution. The constitution is not merely a legal document, but a reflection of the nation's moral rationality. (Muhammad Hairul Ihsan, 2025) In this context, the author observes that the values of Pancasila have a strong coherence with the Hegelian principle of the ethical state. Pancasila positions humans as rational and social beings whose freedom is only meaningful within the framework of responsibility and social justice. Second, the concept of the state as the concrete actualization of freedom can be used to critique democratic practices that are too procedural. Democracy is often reduced to elections and the competition for power, while its ethical substance is neglected. In the Hegelian view, true democracy is a system in which individual freedom functions within a rational structure that guarantees universal interests. (Runesi, 2021)

Thus, democracy requires not only political mechanisms but also a strong moral foundation. Third, the reinterpretation of Hegel also opens up opportunities to develop an ethos of civilized political participation. In Hegel's thought, citizen participation in the state is the highest form of moral freedom. (Nuna & Moonti, 2019) In the Indonesian context, this can be translated as a push to strengthen a rational, participatory political culture, not merely formal participation in elections, but active involvement in policy formation, public education, and social control over power. The author believes this approach can enrich the discourse on Indonesian democracy with a deeper philosophical dimension. Democracy is not simply a system of government, but an expression of the nation's ethical life. By combining the principles of Hegelian rationality with the ethical values of Pancasila, Indonesia can develop a democratic model that is not only politically effective but also morally dignified.

Finally, Hegel's reinterpretation also challenges political practices that tend to be pragmatic and transactional. In many ways, Indonesian politics is still colored by particular interests, economic oligarchy, and weak moral commitment. By viewing the state as a manifestation of ethics, the author believes that political reform must begin with a renewal of the moral consciousness of citizens and political elites. Ethical politics cannot be built without a rational basis for recognizing that the state is a concrete form of shared freedom, not an arena for the pursuit of personal gain.

CONCLUSION

Hegel's political thought made a remarkable contribution to understanding the relationship between freedom, rationality, and the state. Through his work, "Philosophy of Right," Hegel attempted to demonstrate that the state is not merely a structure of power or the result of a social agreement, but rather the actualization of rational ethical ideas. The state, in his view, is the highest manifestation of the objective spirit, where human freedom finds concrete form in the order of law, morality, and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Thus, the state is not in conflict with individual freedom, but rather is a condition for the realization of true freedom, namely freedom that is aware of its rationality and moral responsibility.

The core of Hegel's political philosophy lies in his dialectical view of ethical life. In the dialectical structure of the family, civil society, and the state, Hegel shows how freedom develops from a natural to a rational form. The family represents the natural unity of love, civil society reflects the particularity of individual interests, while the state

becomes the synthesis that unites the two in a universal unity. The state, therefore, is not the result of an external agreement, but rather the result of the dialectical development of freedom itself. It is a living ethical organism, in which the individual will and the universal will are united in moral rationality. Furthermore, the ethical function of the state for Hegel is to guarantee concrete freedom through rational laws and institutions. Law is not merely an external rule, but an objective form of free will; it makes human freedom concrete in social life. A rational state does not oppress individuals but educates them to live as ethical beings. Within this framework, the state has a moral and pedagogical dimension: it educates its citizens to recognize true freedom, not as unlimited freedom, but as freedom conscious of social responsibility.

In the modern context, Hegel's thought remains relevant in addressing the challenges facing democratic nations, including Indonesia. His critique of atomistic liberalism and extreme individualism reminds us that freedom cannot be separated from moral community. Politics detached from ethics will give rise to a crisis of public morality and social inequality. Hegel offers an alternative by positioning the state as a space for the actualization of ethics—where individual freedom and the public interest do not exclude each other, but complement each other within a framework of rationality.

Hegel's thinking in the context of Indonesian democracy can enrich our understanding of a state based on the rule of law and Pancasila. Like Hegel, Pancasila emphasizes the balance between individual freedom, social justice, and collective morality. By combining the principles of Hegelian rationality with the values of Pancasila, Indonesia can build a democracy that is not only procedural but also ethically dignified. Civilized democracy demands an awareness that politics is not merely a power struggle, but rather a means to realize moral freedom and the common good. Thus, Hegel's political philosophy teaches that a true state is rational and ethical. It is not an instrument of power, but rather the living embodiment of moral ideals. Such a state can survive only if its citizens understand freedom as a shared responsibility for building a just and moral order. In this sense, Hegel's thought remains a reflective mirror for the modern world, a reminder that politics without ethics is directionless, and freedom without rationality is meaningless.

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