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Design as a School of Ethics: A Hegelian Approach to Moral Life in Designers*

Mahshid Barani[1] | Seyyed Ali Faregh✉ [2] | Ahad Shahhosseini[3] | Mahboubeh Alborzi[4] | Gunter Bombaerts[5]

1. PhD Candidate, Department of Industrial Design, Tabriz Islamic Art University, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: ma.barani@tabriziau.ac.ir
2. Corresponding Author, Associate Professor, Department of Industrial Design, Tabriz Islamic Art University, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: sfaregh@tabrizu.ac.ir
3. Associate Professor, Department of Industrial Design, Tabriz Islamic Art University, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: ahad.shahhoseini@tabrizu.ac.ir
4. Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran. E-mail: malborzi@shirazu.ac.ir
5. Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy & Ethics, Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. E-mail: g.bombaerts@tue.nl

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ABSTRACT

This article interprets design not merely as a technical activity but as a site for the realization of ethical life in Hegel's sense. Its theoretical framework builds on Hegel's tripartite ethical model, right (recht), morality (moralität), and ethical Life (sittlichkeit), to show how design experience, when situated in institutional roles, mediation of value tensions, and practices of mutual recognition, contributes to the actualization of freedom and responsibility in the social sphere. Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretive–analytical approach, drawing on a close reading of Hegel's Philosophy of Right and major commentaries, brought into dialogue with contemporary literature on design ethics. Findings indicate that the legal and institutional structuring of design, while necessary as the formal ground of freedom, remains insufficient unless complemented by the internalization of responsibility at the individual level and its further embedding within social and professional institutions. Only through this progression can design approach what Hegel conceptualized as "freedom realized in the world of human institutions." The analysis further reveals that ethical tensions, arising from conflicting stakeholder demands or gaps between individual ideals and institutional realities, are not peripheral but constitutive drivers of moral reflection in design practice. Yet the same institutional structures that enable recognition and accountability may also impose constraints that limit the scope of freedom's realization. The study concludes that design can serve as a formative arena of ethical life, where freedom, duty, and mutual recognition are historically and socially shaped and reinterpreted. This reframing provides a conceptual foundation for future research on how design experience both reflects and shapes moral life within diverse institutional contexts.

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Intruduction

Design, in its broadest sense, is not merely the process of producing a product, service, or space; rather, it is a domain in which fundamental ethical, social, and cultural questions are continuously posed and re-examined. Designers whether in architecture, industrial design, or service design encounter situations that require them to evaluate values, identify ethical conflicts, and make decisions with profound implications for individuals and communities (Buchanan, 2001; Fry, 2012). These encounters, particularly when embedded in real-world projects involving diverse stakeholders, not only influence the quality of design outcomes but also play a decisive role in shaping and transforming designers' moral identity and self-awareness (Tonkinwise, 2014). From this perspective, design experience can be understood as a "school of ethics," in which designers, through engagement with real-world challenges, learn, refine, and redefine their ethical skills and virtues.

In recent decades, significant scholarship has been devoted to design ethics. Movements such as the Bauhaus, from their inception, adopted a normative stance that emphasized the social responsibility of design. Likewise, Victor Papanek, in his classic book Design for the Real World, underscored design's social responsibility and critiqued the "five myths" that, in his view, misguided industrial design: mass production, planned obsolescence, a focus on wants instead of needs, lack of control, and quantity over quality (Papanek, 1970). He called for a fundamental rethinking of design's purpose: design should serve to solve the real problems of people, not merely to produce profitable commodities. These debates laid the groundwork for newer approaches such as Value Sensitive Design (Friedman, Kahn, & Borning, 2002), Mediation Theory in design (Verbeek, 2011), and Design Justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

Karsten Harries (1997), in his reflections on the ethics of architecture, distinguishes between two kinds of disciplines: those that regard themselves as value-neutral, and those that acknowledge their intrinsic normativity. According to Ozkaramanli and Nagenborg (2024), design belongs to the latter category, since it is inherently entangled with norms and values. Nevertheless, due to the absence of a systematic ethical discourse within the discipline, design ethics has often been addressed externally. They have proposed a framework for embedding ethics more deeply into design processes, showing that ethics in design is not an external imposition but an inseparable part of the practice itself, with the potential to foster more responsible forms of design.

One of the most powerful philosophical frameworks for advancing the present inquiry can be found in the thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977) and the *Philosophy of Right* (1821/1991), Hegel conceives of ethics not as a fixed set of external rules but as a dynamic, historical, and social process for the formation of "moral subjectivity" and "self-consciousness." At the core of this system lies the principle of "mutual recognition," according to which individuals construct and

stabilize their moral identity not in isolation but through reciprocal recognition within institutions and social interactions (Honneth, 1995; Pinkard, 2017; Redding, 2020).

The design process, in which designers negotiate conflicting perspectives, revisit assumptions, and test solutions that must align with, or even create, new social and cultural values, bears a strong resemblance to Hegel's notion of Bildung, the formative, reciprocal shaping of self and world. In this process, the designer not only transforms the surrounding environment but is also transformed in moral and identity terms.

Despite the philosophical richness of this framework, its potential for analyzing the experiences of designers has received limited attention in the design literature. While some studies have addressed normative dimensions of design such as the ethical implications of technologies (Verbeek, 2011) or the notion of "responsible design" (Fry, 2012), few have explicitly examined how the design process itself may serve as a domain for cultivating and transforming designers' moral subjectivity. The central question of this study thus emerges: How can the design process, when examined through the lens of Hegel's moral philosophy, be understood as a site for the formation of ethical life? To address this question, this article develops a conceptual framework that integrates Hegel's ethical triad (Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit) with designers' real-world experiences, thereby redefining design as a practical and social context for moral growth.

1. Literature Review

The domain of design ethics spans from the framing and definition of problems to the nature of designed artifacts or systems and the ethical consequences they produce. More broadly, this field may be understood as the systematic study of the moral principles and values that govern both the design process and its outcomes (Chan, 2018). Verbeek (2011) articulates this connection with precision: if ethics addresses the fundamental question of "how ought we to act," and technologies form part of the answer to that question, then the design of technology should be regarded as a material embodiment of ethics. On this basis, every design decision from determining the subject and scope of a project to identifying stakeholders and the values embedded in the final product, possesses an inherently moral dimension (van Gorp & van de Poel, 2001).

Early studies in design ethics predominantly focused on normative theories, with the aim of clarifying "what designers ought to do." A notable example in this category is Value Sensitive Design (VSD), which has been advanced as a structured framework for identifying and integrating moral values throughout the design process (Friedman et al., 2002). VSD is complemented by tools such as anticipatory and retrospective analysis, ethical matrices, the Delphi method, and responsibility analysis, which are used to anticipate, identify, and resolve the value conflicts that frequently emerge in design projects (Hansson, 2017; van Gorp & van de Poel, 2001). In addition, research has examined the relationship between designers' personal

values and design outcomes (Shilton, 2013) as well as the role of ethics experts in design processes (van Wynsberghe & Robbins, 2014).

With the practice turn in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) in the past decade (Kuutti & Bannon, 2014), the focus of design ethics has shifted from abstract guidelines toward the lived experiences of designers. Studies such as Gray and Chivukula (2019) have examined factors influencing ethical mediation, while Chivukula et al. (2020) have identified dimensions of design practice that shape ethical awareness and action. Lindberg et al. (2020), employing participatory methods, have documented the operational challenges and questions raised for ethics in design.

Ethical responsibility is another foundational concept in the literature on design ethics. Fahlquist et al. (2014) distinguish between individual and collective responsibility. In this context, ethical responsibility in design emerges from complex and multilayered interactions and cannot be reduced merely to the individual decisions of designers, thereby underscoring its particular significance. Approaches such as those proposed by Walsh (2007) and Lindberg et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity of internalizing ethics into the mindsets and everyday habits of designers. From this perspective, ethical awareness is cultivated through sustained engagement with real-world contexts, dialogue with stakeholders, and the confrontation of value conflicts (Schön, 1983).

Despite the diversity of research, many approaches in design ethics remain centered on the individual and overlook the structural and socio-institutional contexts that shape designers' moral agency (Dindler et al., 2022). This research gap highlights the need for theoretical frameworks that can connect design experience with the cultivation of moral capacities within the broader web of social relations and institutional structures. Accordingly, the present study draws on Hegel's moral philosophy, which emphasizes the dialectical dynamic between individual and society, as an analytical foundation for such an approach.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Understanding Design: Process, Practice, and Context

The concept of design can be used both as a noun and as a verb, referring to the final product as well as to the process of bringing it into being (Lawson, 2006). In its broadest sense, design is understood as the simultaneous framing of problems and generation of solutions (Hassan, 2023). Rather than following a linear path, design is composed of a series of embedded and iterative processes (Cash et al., 2023). It entails creative and integrative thinking necessary for idea generation, while at the same time requiring problem analysis and the synthesis of diverse elements into solutions that can be critically evaluated. Since the origins of design research, attempts to describe and conceptualize this process have been central concerns.

Within this framework, the role of the designer is to create products, services, and systems that are both technically adequate and aesthetically innovative. Designers ultimately aim to

transform the surrounding world and improve human conditions, which necessitates mastery of robust theoretical and methodological foundations (Borgianni et al., 2023). From one perspective, design is described as an individual-centered activity, where the designer is engaged in practices often categorized as "design thinking" or "designerly thinking." From another perspective, design is conceived as a social process that unfolds in the interactions among multiple agents (Nelius et al., 2020). In this view, design is not confined to individual activity but emerges through social relations in which information, skills, and experiences are exchanged. Communication practices strongly shape decision-making, and enhanced communicative skills lead to more effective design outcomes. Understanding the complex interrelation of emotions, decision-making processes, and design activities thus requires a holistic view of the design experience (Ho, 2010).

When facing complex issues, designers are often only partially aware of possible final outcomes. Accordingly, they distinguish between conventional problem-solving and more challenging projects that require novel approaches. For some, design is primarily an intuitive and tacit process, while others regard it as rational and evaluative, or even as an unconscious practice.

A central notion in this regard is flexibility, understood as the ability to adapt design processes to unpredictable conditions (Molaei et al., 2020). Flexibility not only allows alignment with schedules and problem characteristics but also enhances creativity and innovation. A framework of six principles, initial insight, dual-space process, iterative approach, holistic view, open-ended process, and a soft and adaptive methodology has been proposed as a foundation for developing flexible design practices that support adaptability and creativity (Molaei et al., 2020). Another important feature highlighted in design research is tolerance of ambiguity. This is regarded as a personality trait describing the degree to which individuals can cope with uncertain or ambiguous situations. Those with high tolerance of ambiguity perceive such situations as stimulating, while those with low tolerance often experience stress, anxiety, and irritability, reacting impulsively. Prior studies have shown that individuals with high ambiguity tolerance excel in complex problem-solving, divergent thinking, and brainstorming, suggesting that ambiguity tolerance is a key enabler of creative thought (Mahmoud et al., 2020).

Finally, recent research emphasizes the role of design in the early stages of innovation. At this stage, designers actively explore the "problem space," seeking opportunities and directions while developing a broad range of creative ideas (Zeng et al., 2024).

2.2. Design and Its Ethical Context

Ethics in design cannot be regarded as an external or supplementary element to the design process; rather, it is an inseparable part of the very act of designing. Design decisions are always formed within social, cultural, and institutional contexts and inherently carry values and norms. If neglected, these may result in a form of "hidden ethics." Therefore, design methods should

provide processes through which such values and norms are rendered explicit and open to collective and critical dialogue among stakeholders (Ozkaramanli & Nagenborg, 2024).

From this perspective, ethics in design is always situated. No ethical issue can be understood independently of its institutional and cultural context. As Suchman (2000) has shown, the meaning and legitimacy of human actions only emerge within specific social and cultural settings. In this sense, the Scandinavian tradition of Participatory Design underscores the principle that ethics is not a universal, predetermined norm but rather the outcome of situated and interactive dialogue between designers and stakeholders (Ehn, 2008).

Another crucial dimension of ethics in design is the cultivation of moral engagement. Ethics should not be perceived merely as a checklist or an externally imposed regulation, but as an intrinsic experience that involves designers and fosters their moral sensitivity. Design, as a learning process, can lead to ethical growth, as designers through confronting tensions and conflicts are given opportunities for critical reflection on values and for developing their ethical awareness (Dindler et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, ethics in design is not confined to the individual. Design processes are typically the outcome of collaborations across multidisciplinary teams and diverse institutions, a phenomenon that Nissenbaum (1996) has described as the "problem of many hands." Under such conditions, assigning ethical responsibility becomes a challenge. Accordingly, design methods must provide mechanisms for clarifying and distributing responsibility, so that ethical accountability is recognized as a collective matter embedded within networks of actors (Spiekermann & Winkler, 2020).

Ultimately, ethics in design is realized not in abstract principles but in practice. Everyday moments ranging from choosing between two product features to interactions in team meetings constitute arenas where ethics is enacted. As Schön (1983) has argued in his concept of "reflection-in-action," ethical learning occurs precisely in the immediacy of practice. In line with this, Costanza-Chock (2020), through the framework of Design Justice, emphasizes that ethics in design is realized only when marginalized voices and experiences are actively included and empowered within the design process. From this viewpoint, ethics in design is not situated at the level of rhetoric, but within the very texture of everyday interactions and the institutionalized practices of designers' professional lives (Ozkaramanli & Nagenborg, 2024).

2.3. Hegel's Moral Philosophy as a Framework: From Recht to Sittlichkeit

Building on the situated and collective dimensions of ethics in design discussed earlier, this section turns to Hegel's philosophy of ethics as the conceptual framework for the present study. Hegel's account illuminates how freedom and responsibility are realized within the structures of social and professional life, including design practice.

In the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel presents a systematic account of ethics that is inseparably bound to the concept of freedom (Freiheit). Freedom, for Hegel, is not merely the negative absence of external constraint but a positive freedom (positive Freiheit) that becomes

actualized through conscious participation in objective social institutions (Hegel, 1991/1821, §4; Houlgate, 2005: 35). Any account that neglects this inherently social dimension of ethics, he argues, remains partial and reductive (Pippin, 2008, 56; Pinkard, 2017, 144).

Hegel elaborates this process of the realization of freedom in three dialectical moments: abstract right (Recht), morality (Moralität), and ethical life (Sittlichkeit). These moments do not form a linear sequence but are interwoven stages, each sublating (aufheben) the previous one. Taken together, they chart the development of freedom from its abstract legal form to its concrete actualization within social and institutional life (Hegel, 1991/1821, §29).

The first moment, abstract right, recognizes the individual as a legal person (Rechtsperson) capable of property ownership, contractual relations, and legal protection (Hegel, 1991/1821, §§29–104). This stage establishes the juridical foundations of civil society and guarantees the formal equality of all. Yet it remains abstract insofar as it conceives the individual apart from social relations and the lived content of life. Ethical orientation here is restricted to the protection of others' rights, essential but minimal in terms of moral responsibility (Houlgate, 2005, 55; Wood, 1990, 67).

The second moment emphasizes inwardness, conceiving the moral subject as a self-conscious agent endowed with conscience (Gewissen), intention, and responsibility (Hegel, 1991/1821, §§105–141). Freedom is here deepened through autonomy and inner conviction. Yet Hegel warns of a fundamental danger: reducing ethics to individual conscience risks devolving into "moral subjectivism" (Pippin, 2008, 74; Pinkard, 2017, 202). If personal conviction is taken as the ultimate criterion, morality becomes arbitrary, relative, or even contradictory. As Hegel shows earlier in the Phenomenology of Spirit, "purely subjective freedom can turn into its opposite, resulting in alienation and negation" (Hegel, 1977/1807, §§166–230, 146). Thus, while Moralität is indispensable for cultivating responsibility, it is insufficient in isolation. The individual must be integrated into collective structures to overcome the limitations of subjectivity.

The third moment represents the culmination of this dialectic: the reconciliation of individual freedom with objective institutions. Hegel writes: "Ethical life is the concept of freedom, the living good which has its being in self-consciousness, and it is known by it; it is freedom which has become the existing world and the nature of self-consciousness" (Hegel, 1991/1821, §142, 199).

The family, civil society, and the state are the principal institutions of this reconciliation. Rather than restricting freedom, they enable its realization, since freedom becomes actual only through participation, accountability, and mutual recognition (Anerkennung) (Honneth, 1995, 95). At this stage, ethics is neither an abstract law nor a merely private conviction but a lived, institutionalized form of life.

Together, these three moments articulate the dialectical development of freedom in Hegel's system. Recht provides the formal legal foundation of freedom; Moralität deepens it through

personal responsibility and inward motivation; and Sittlichkeit consummates it in the concrete practices and institutions of social life. To neglect any of these dimensions would undermine the coherence of Hegel's account. By situating ethics within this tripartite structure, Hegel critiques the reduction of morality to legalistic or individualist views, instead offering a historically grounded, socially embedded conception of ethical life that continues to resonate in contemporary debates (Redding, 2010, 92).

This framework thus provides a theoretical basis for linking Hegel's ethical philosophy with the lived experiences of designers, offering a way to assess how design practice may contribute to the cultivation of ethical subjectivity.

To consolidate the preceding discussion and to offer a visual synthesis, Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework that maps Hegel's three stages of ethical development, Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit, as a dialectical process of moral becoming. This framework not only summarizes the philosophical foundations but also provides the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis, where these stages are reinterpreted through the lens of design practice.

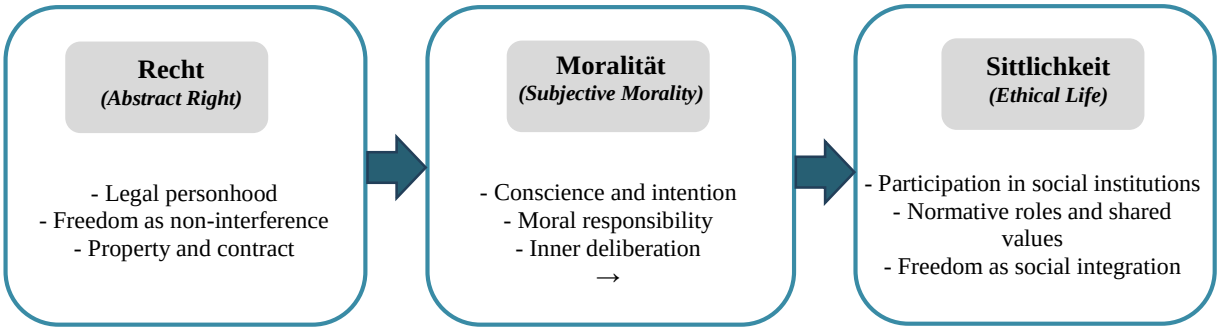

Figure 1. *The dialectical structure of Hegelian ethics, illustrating moral becoming across three stages: Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit (Hegel, 1991 [1821]).*

2.4. Ethical Life in Hegel's Philosophy

Ethical life, as elaborated earlier in section 3.3, denotes the institutional realization of freedom. As Hegel emphasizes, justice, laws, and institutions have validity "an und für sich" (Hegel, 1991/1821, §144), independently of subjective conviction. Ethical life thus embodies what he elsewhere terms a "second nature," in which moral orientation is no longer external but ingrained through habituation (Gewohnheit) and participation in established institutions (Hegel, 1991/1821, §151).

Ethical life unfolds through three principal institutions: the family, civil society, and the state. The family represents a sphere of particularity and care; civil society organizes the system of needs, private law, and economic exchange; and the state reconciles individual freedom with the universal by providing structures of participation, recognition, and accountability (Hegel,

1991/1821, §157). Far from restricting freedom, these institutions make freedom actual, since as Hegel insists, "man has rights only in so far as he has duties" (Hegel, 1991/1821, §155). Freedom and obligation, in this framework, are not opposites but mutually constitutive. Contemporary commentators have underscored this point by interpreting Hegel's account as a theory of "social freedom" (Pippin, 2008, 46; Pinkard, 2017, 165). Freedom is not a solitary achievement but a relational condition, realized only in contexts of mutual recognition (Anerkennung) and institutional mediation (Honneth, 1995, 94). Ethical life is a dynamic, dialectical process in which individuals internalize norms while also retaining the capacity for critique and transformation. As Hardimon (1994, 90) argues, the strength of Hegel's model lies precisely in its capacity to integrate the normative authority of institutions with the possibility of their rational reform.

In this light, ethical life cannot be equated with "everyday morality." While everyday moral practices may remain contingent, fragmented, or subjective, Hegel's Sittlichkeit denotes the historically grounded and socially embodied actuality of freedom. It shows how morality is produced and reproduced not merely through private conscience, but through rational habituation, institutional roles, and the practice of mutual recognition. This interpretation also highlights why Hegel's moral philosophy remains highly relevant for fields such as design, where ethical responsibility is enacted not in isolation but within collective practices, organizational structures, and shared forms of life.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive–analytical approach. The data for the research were not gathered through observation or interviews but through a close and critical reading of philosophical texts and contemporary design ethics literature. The primary foundation lies in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1821/1991) and its authoritative interpretations, in order to reconstruct the three stages of "Right," "Morality," and "Ethical Life" as dialectical moments of freedom. This philosophical framework was subsequently contextualized in relation to contemporary debates in design ethics.

The aim of this methodology is not to generate empirical data but to construct a conceptual framework that links Hegel's moral philosophy with the practice of design, thereby providing the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis and discussion.

4. Discussion

4.1. Reinterpreting Design Experience through Hegel's Tripartite Structure of Ethical Life

This study aims to reinterpret the experience of design through Hegel's tripartite conception of ethical life, Recht (Right), Moralität (Morality), and Sittlichkeit (Ethical Life), and to examine how design exerts a hierarchical influence on the ethical formation of designers' lifestyles.

As outlined in the theoretical foundations, in Hegel's philosophy Recht represents the initial level of freedom's realization, where the individual attains recognition as a legal person (Hegel, 1991/1821, §§29–104). Within the context of design, this level is reflected in the recognition of designers as professional actors embedded in legal and institutional frameworks, where responsibilities are articulated through professional codes, contractual obligations, and intellectual property regulations. At this stage, ethical relations are expressed primarily as a commitment to respecting and not infringing upon the rights of others. As Houlgate (2005) observes, this level secures formal equality yet remains confined to an abstract plane. Thus, the designer at this level is primarily concerned with external obligations and institutional norms, rather than with deeper processes of ethical reflection.

The second level in Hegel's philosophy, Moralität, concerns the internalization of responsibility and the pivotal role of individual conscience (Gewissen). In design practice, this stage can be understood in relation to the ways designers structure their work around inner values, intentions, and beliefs such as commitments to sustainability, social justice, or inclusivity. At this level, designers often interpret their decisions as direct extensions of their personal moral convictions. Nevertheless, as Hegel warns, reliance solely on individual conscience carries the inherent risk of moral subjectivism (Pippin, 2008; Pinkard, 2017). Designers, too, encounter this risk: a personal moral outlook, if exercised without institutional grounding or collective mechanisms, may produce ethical inconsistency. Thus, while this stage is indispensable for cultivating individual responsibility, it remains insufficient on its own and must be anchored within collective and institutional contexts.

The third level in Hegel's system, Sittlichkeit, marks the stage at which freedom is realized concretely within institutions such as family, civil society, and the state. Within design, this stage corresponds to the recognition that design practice inevitably unfolds within a dense network of social, institutional, and cultural relations. Hegel famously characterizes this stage as "ethical life is the concept of freedom … freedom which has become the existing world and the nature of self-consciousness" (Hegel, 1991/1821, §142, 199). Accordingly, the lifestyle of the designer at this level is shaped not merely by individual choices but also through collective processes, mutual recognition (Anerkennung), and institutional responsibility (Honneth, 1995). Designers can be said to attain the highest level of lived ethics when, in active interaction with these collective contexts, they mediate conflicting stakeholder interests and engage in social systems that render accountability and reciprocal recognition binding.

Taken together, the experience of design, viewed through a Hegelian lens, unfolds hierarchically: Recht provides the minimal foundation of freedom and responsibility; Moralität deepens this foundation at the internal and individual level; and Sittlichkeit brings it to realization within the framework of institutions and social life. Yet these levels do not unfold in isolation, nor as a strictly linear progression. Instead, designers navigate them iteratively, negotiating between external rights and obligations, internal values and conscience, and

institutional mechanisms of recognition and responsibility. As illustrated in Figure 2, moments of friction, whether between personal ideals and institutional realities or between stakeholder demands and a designer's moral convictions, emerge as formative experiences. Such tensions cultivate a moral subject who is responsive, situated, and acutely aware of their embeddedness within complex systems, precisely the form of situated moral subjectivity that Hegel's conception of Sittlichkeit makes intelligible. In this sense, design is not a neutral or merely technical activity but an inherently value-laden domain in which both values and the moral self are actively constituted, thereby disclosing the realization of ethical life in its Hegelian sense.

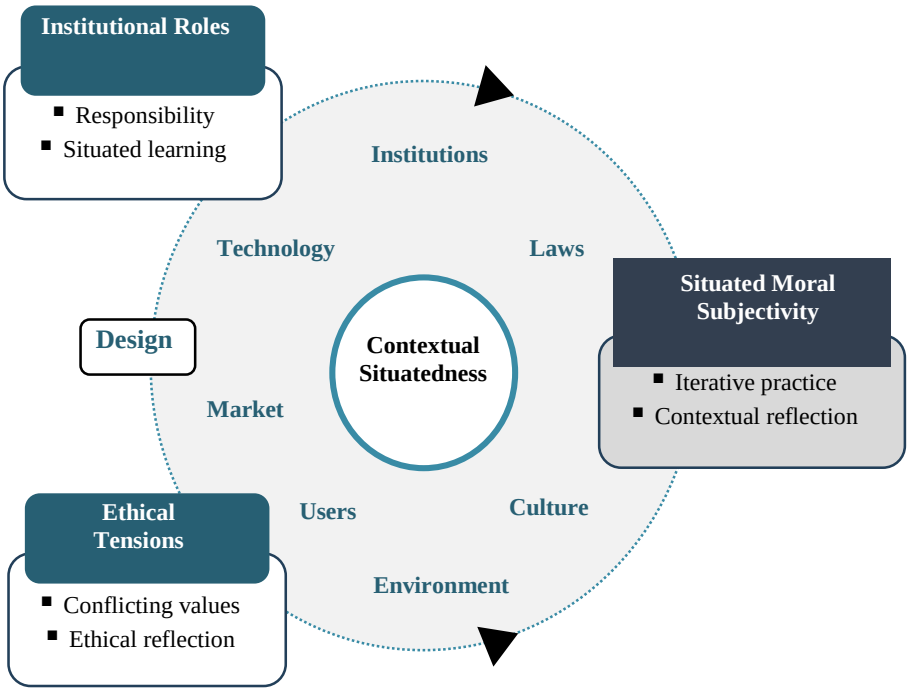

Figure 2. *Moral Subjectivity through Design Practice: a conceptual interpretation through Hegelian ethics (Sittlichkeit).*

4.2. The Dialectic of Ethical Life in Design Practice

Although Hegel's tripartite structure of Recht (Right), Moralität (Morality), and Sittlichkeit (Ethical Life) provides a useful framework for situating the ethical dimensions of design, these levels should not be conceived as static categories. Rather, they operate in dialectical interaction, continually shaping and being shaped by designers lived experience. What emerges, therefore, is not a linear process but a dynamic field of tensions and mediations among individual beliefs, institutional requirements, and collective responsibilities.

On the one hand, legal and institutional norms (Recht) may guarantee a minimal foundation of equality and accountability, yet they also risk reducing ethical responsibility to mere compliance with external codes. Designers frequently encounter situations in which legal conformity is insufficient to address the moral weight of their decisions; for example, when intellectual property regimes restrict the open circulation of knowledge that could serve the public good. On the other hand, reliance on individual conscience (Moralität) can empower designers to align their practice with values such as sustainability or inclusivity. Yet when conscience is exercised in isolation, it risks collapsing into moral subjectivism. Personal commitments, in the absence of collective validation or structural support, face the danger of becoming ineffective or internally contradictory.

In this regard, the ethical life of design cannot be exhausted by any single dimension but arises through their interplay. Put differently, Sittlichkeit should not be understood simply as an external backdrop to design, but as the sphere in which tensions between Recht and Moralität are mediated through institutions and collective arrangements. These institutions simultaneously enable and constrain designers, compelling them to sustain a delicate balance between autonomy and mutual recognition. As Hegel emphasizes, freedom is realized only when these dimensions are integrated within a social world in which accountability and recognition are binding.

In this perspective, design practice emerges as a stage where ethical life is realized through processes of negotiation and mediation among individual, institutional, and collective levels. The lifestyle and choices of designers are shaped not by adherence to a fixed moral code but by their ability to manage the tensions between formal rights, personal convictions, and institutional responsibilities. Such a dialectical view highlights that design is not reducible to technical problem-solving; it is always a practice co-constituted by political and ethical dimensions, unfolding within and potentially transforming, the very social structures in which it is embedded.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the experience of design cannot be reduced to the level of everyday morality, nor merely to a set of legal or individual duties. Rather, design, as a socio-cultural practice, constitutes an arena in which freedom, mutual recognition, and collective responsibility are simultaneously experienced and reshaped. In other words, design emerges as a stage upon which Hegel's tripartite conception of Recht (Right), Moralität (Morality), and Sittlichkeit (Ethical Life) does not appear in abstract or isolated form, but unfolds dialectically in ways that shape both the lifestyle and the moral subjectivity of designers.

At the first level, design is anchored in legal and institutional frameworks that guarantee accountability and equality. Yet this foundation remains meaningful only when complemented by the internalization of values and personal responsibility. At the second level, individual

conscience and personal commitments empower designers to align their work with values such as sustainability or inclusivity, but, as Hegel warns, reliance on subjective conscience alone risks inconsistency and moral relativism. Finally, at the level of ethical life (Sittlichkeit), design acquires its concrete meaning within the structures of family, civil society, and institutions, where obligations become collective, recognition becomes reciprocal, and freedom becomes socially realized.

On this basis, design can no longer be viewed simply as a technical problem-solving process or as the production of artifacts. We argue that design practice constitutes as a formative arena of moral learning. Designers, in mediating between formal rights, personal values, and institutional responsibilities, not only shape the outcomes of design but also cultivate their own ethical way of life. From this perspective, design may be conceived as a school of ethics, where designers develop moral agency by confronting conflicts, negotiating among diverse stakeholders, and participating in the institutional contexts that structure social life.

Ultimately, this Hegelian reinterpretation of design offers a new horizon for both research and design education. Rather than treating ethics as an external code or prescriptive guideline, it should be acknowledged as an intrinsic and inescapable dimension of design practice itself. Such a perspective opens pathways toward the cultivation of designers who are not only attentive to functional and aesthetic qualities but also actively shape moral life through their practice. Future research is thus invited to further explore the interplay between design and ethical life across diverse professional fields such as architecture, industrial design, and service design and within varied social and cultural contexts, thereby deepening the understanding of design as a lived practice of morality.

Declaration of the Use of AI-assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT solely for the purpose of English language editing and proofreading. All intellectual content, analyses, and arguments presented in this article are the authors own. The authors carefully reviewed and revised all outputs of this tool and take full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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