

## Beyond rationalism: Pancasila as a symbolic system

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### Abstract

Pancasila has predominantly been interpreted within a rational-normative philosophical tradition that emphasises conceptual coherence, logical consistency, and systematic relationships among its five principles. While this approach has contributed significantly to the development of Pancasila philosophy, it remains limited in explaining how Pancasila functions as a living reality within Indonesian society. This study proposes an alternative interpretation by examining Pancasila through Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. Employing a qualitative philosophical approach, the research applies a conceptual adequacy test combined with interpretative conceptual analysis to evaluate the extent to which Pancasila fulfils the characteristics of a symbolic system. The analysis reconstructs five conceptual criteria derived from Cassirer's theory—mediating function, meaning construction, collective dimension, experiential orientation, and independence from empirical verification—and systematically maps them onto the structure and functions of Pancasila. The findings demonstrate that each principle (*sila*) operates not merely as a normative proposition but as a symbolic form that mediates collective meaning, shapes civic identity, provides ethical and political orientation, and legitimises Indonesia's socio-political order. Furthermore, the study argues that interpreting Pancasila as a symbolic system offers an alternative epistemological framework that complements the dominant rational-formal tradition by explaining its enduring relevance through symbolic mediation rather than solely through logical coherence. This reinterpretation expands contemporary Pancasila studies by connecting them with philosophy of culture, symbolic philosophy, and interpretative approaches to political thought, while providing broader implications for Pancasila education, civic education, and future philosophical research.

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## Introduction

Pancasila is widely understood as the foundation of the state, the national ideology, and a philosophical system that serves as the normative basis for national and civic life in Indonesia



(Kaelan, 2013). It also occupies a central position within Indonesian citizenship education as the principal source of civic values and national identity formation (Kalidjernih & Winarno, 2019). In various academic studies, Pancasila is frequently situated within a philosophical framework by emphasising its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions (Kaelan, 2002; Notonagoro, 1975). This approach regards Pancasila as a system of values characterised by conceptual coherence and rational principles that can be philosophically explained and justified. Consequently, Pancasila is viewed not merely as a political-historical product emerging from ideological compromises during the independence period, but also as a profound reflection on the nature of humanity, society, and collective life that is both universal and contextual.

Nevertheless, the dominance of rational and normative approaches to understanding Pancasila raises several epistemic limitations that deserve serious attention. Such approaches tend to emphasise logical systematicity and the conceptual relationships among the five principles (*sila*), thereby treating Pancasila as a closed philosophical system that must satisfy strict standards of internal consistency (Kaelan, 2013). In practice, however, this perspective has not fully explained how Pancasila functions in the lived realities of a pluralistic, dynamic, and meaning-contested society. As Gadamer (2004) argues, meaning arises not only from a system's conceptual coherence but also from processes of understanding embedded in tradition and human experience. Pancasila exists not only as a collection of normative propositions formulated on paper but also as a living reality that is interpreted in diverse ways and internalised within the collective consciousness of the Indonesian nation through social practices transmitted across generations. This understanding is consistent with the conception of Pancasila as a living ideology, namely, an ideology that is continuously actualised, interpreted, and negotiated within Indonesian social life (Prasetio, 2023). This dynamic understanding also shapes contemporary debates on Pancasila's legitimacy, recognition, and institutionalisation in post-Reform Indonesia (Hastangka & Ediyono, 2023). Furthermore, ongoing transformations in the social order continually reshape the meanings attached to Pancasila in accordance with the evolving challenges faced by Indonesian society (Samekto & Purwanti, 2023).

Contemporary Indonesian society presents an increasingly complex context that further exposes the limitations of purely rational-normative interpretations of Pancasila. Rapid digital transformation, political polarisation, the growing influence of identity-based politics, and persistent challenges related to religious intolerance have intensified contestations over the meaning and implementation of Pancasila in public life (Hafel, 2023). At the same time, concerns regarding civic identity among younger generations have emerged alongside the expansion of digital public spheres, where competing ideological narratives continuously reshape collective understandings of national values. These developments suggest that the challenge facing Pancasila today is no longer confined to its philosophical coherence as a normative system but also concerns its capacity to function as a shared framework of meaning capable of sustaining social cohesion within an increasingly pluralistic and fragmented society (Gadamer, 2004; Prasetio, 2023). Consequently, a renewed philosophical interpretation is required to explain not only what Pancasila normatively prescribes, but also how it operates as a living source of collective meaning in contemporary Indonesia.

**Table 1.**  
*Mapping of Previous Studies on Pancasila*

| Author(s)         | Research Focus                          | Main Contribution                                              | Research Limitation                                  |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Notonagoro (1975) | Pancasila as a philosophical foundation | Established the ontological and axiological basis of Pancasila | Does not examine the symbolic dimension of Pancasila |

|                           |                                                       |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kaelan (2002, 2013)       | Pancasila as a rational philosophical system          | Systematised Pancasila through ontological, epistemological, and axiological analysis | Focuses primarily on conceptual coherence and normative consistency                                             |
| Prasetio (2023)           | Pancasila as a living ideology                        | Demonstrates that Pancasila is continuously interpreted and negotiated in society     | Does not explain the symbolic mechanism through which Pancasila generates collective meaning                    |
| Nanggala (2023)           | Internalisation of Pancasila values                   | Explores educational processes of value transmission                                  | Limited to pedagogical implementation without philosophical analysis of symbolism.                              |
| Samekto & Purwanti (2023) | Reinterpretation of Pancasila in contemporary society | Highlights the dynamic transformation of Pancasila in response to social change       | Does not employ a symbolic-philosophical framework.                                                             |
| This study                | Pancasila as a symbolic system                        | Reinterprets Pancasila through Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms          | Provides a symbolic-philosophical explanation of how Pancasila organises collective meaning and social reality. |

*Sources: Author, 2026.*

As summarised in Table 1, previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding Pancasila from philosophical, educational, and socio-political perspectives. Existing scholarship has largely emphasised Pancasila as a rational philosophical system, a normative state ideology, or a living ideology continuously interpreted within social practice. Although these studies acknowledge Pancasila's dynamic and contextual nature, they rarely examine the symbolic mechanisms through which Indonesian society constructs, shares, and reproduces its values. No previous study has systematically employed Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms to reinterpret Pancasila as a symbolic system. This theoretical gap underpins the present study, which seeks to explain not only Pancasila's normative content but also its symbolic functions in organising collective meaning, identity, and social life.

The novelty of this study lies in its systematic application of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms as an original analytical lens for Pancasila studies, an approach that, as Table 1 demonstrates, has not been undertaken in the existing literature. Rather than treating Pancasila merely as a rational-normative system to be logically justified, this study reconstructs five conceptual criteria derived from Cassirer's theory and maps them systematically onto Pancasila's five principles, thereby offering a philosophically grounded account of how Pancasila mediates collective meaning, shapes civic identity, and sustains socio-political legitimacy independently of strict, logical coherence. This contribution is original in two respects: theoretically, it introduces symbolic-philosophical analysis as a complementary paradigm to the dominant rational-normative tradition in Pancasila scholarship; and practically, it offers a new interpretative framework with direct implications for Pancasila education and civic education in Indonesia.

The gap between Pancasila as a conceptual construct and Pancasila as a social reality indicates the need for an alternative approach that bridges the two methodologically and theoretically. In everyday life, people do not always understand Pancasila through systematic

rational argumentation; instead, they experience it through state rituals, visual symbols, national narratives, historical commemorations, and social experiences that collectively shape their understanding of communal life. Numerous studies show that people primarily appreciate Pancasila's values through internalisation and cultural transmission in social life, rather than through mere cognitive comprehension of its normative formulations (Nanggala, 2023; Suprayogi et al., 2024). This phenomenon suggests a symbolic dimension within Pancasila that philosophical scholarship has not yet fully explored. Yet this symbolic dimension may provide the key to a more comprehensive understanding of Pancasila's vitality and relevance in contemporary Indonesia. In this regard, Pancasila as a living ideology continues to undergo actualisation and reinterpretation through diverse social practices within society (Prasetyo, 2023; Samekto & Purwanti, 2023).

Among the various philosophical approaches to symbolism and interpretation, Ernst Cassirer provides a particularly suitable framework for the present study because his philosophy places symbolic forms at the centre of human understanding. While philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur primarily examine symbols as objects of interpretation, Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasises the hermeneutical process through which meaning emerges in historical understanding, and Clifford Geertz analyses symbols within specific cultural systems, Cassirer offers a broader philosophical account of symbols as constitutive forms through which human beings construct reality itself. His concept of symbolic forms explains not merely how symbols are interpreted, but how they actively organise human experience, social order, and collective meaning. This theoretical orientation makes Cassirer especially relevant for reinterpreting Pancasila, not simply as a collection of normative principles, but as a symbolic system that structures the collective worldview of Indonesian society.

Building upon this rationale, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms provides the conceptual foundation for the present study. Through *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1929) and *An Essay on Man* (1944), Cassirer characterises human beings as *animal symbolicum*, creatures who construct and understand reality not merely through biological instincts but through the medium of symbols (Cassirer, 1944). In Cassirer's view, symbols are not merely secondary representational tools; rather, they constitute fundamental media that actively shape the structures of meaning in human life (Cassirer, 1944; Krois, 1987). Language, myth, religion, art, and science are symbolic forms that enable human beings to interpret the world, establish social orders, and transmit values across time (Cassirer, 1944). Accordingly, human reality always appears as a reality mediated by symbolic systems that shape how individuals and communities understand themselves and their world. Consequently, symbolic forms are not passive reflections of reality but constitutive structures through which human beings organise experience and produce social meaning. This constitutive role of symbols distinguishes Cassirer's philosophy from approaches that primarily treat symbols as objects of interpretation or cultural representation.

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is relevant to the study of Pancasila because it explains how symbolic forms mediate collective experience and sustain systems of meaning beyond formal rational justification. From Cassirer's perspective, social reality is shaped not only by formal rationality and propositional logic but also by networks of symbols that provide direction, cohesion, and meaning for collective life. Consequently, Pancasila may be understood as a symbolic formation that not only contains normative content but also performs integrative and orientational functions within society.

Building upon the gaps identified in previous scholarship, the present study contributes to Pancasila studies in three respects. First, it introduces Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms as an alternative epistemological framework for interpreting Pancasila. Second, it shifts the analytical focus from the logical coherence of Pancasila towards its symbolic functions in organising collective meaning, identity, and social reality. Third, it shows that Pancasila's

enduring relevance may be explained not only through its normative content but also through its operation as a symbolic system embedded in Indonesian social life.

Against this background, this article aims to reinterpret Pancasila as a symbolic system within Cassirer's framework through a series of multilayered conceptual analyses. More specifically, the article explores three interrelated analytical questions: first, in what sense can Pancasila be understood as a symbolic system rather than merely a system of normative propositions? Second, how does each principle (*sila*) of Pancasila function as a symbolic form that organises the dimensions of collective life? Third, what are the theoretical implications of this symbolic reading for the epistemology of Pancasila, particularly in responding to critiques concerning the ambiguity and elasticity of its meanings?

To address these questions, this article employs a comparative and interpretative conceptual analysis. The analysis begins with a critical reconstruction of the core concepts within Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, which are then systematically projected onto the structure and content of Pancasila. This reinterpretation is not intended to replace existing approaches within Pancasila philosophy but rather to complement them with a more contextual perspective.

## Method

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-philosophical approach using conceptual and interpretative analysis. The research does not assume that Pancasila is automatically a symbolic system; rather, it asks whether Pancasila fulfils the characteristics of a symbolic system as formulated by Ernst Cassirer. Accordingly, this study is conceptual-verificative rather than confirmatory of a predetermined thesis.

The primary method employed is the conceptual adequacy test, an analytical procedure that evaluates the degree of correspondence between a particular object and a specific conceptual framework. In philosophy, social theory, and hermeneutics, this method is commonly used to assess the validity of applying a concept to a concrete phenomenon. Unlike empirical testing, which relies on observation and quantitative measurement, conceptual testing operates through philosophical argumentation, the mapping of characteristics, and logical evaluation between concepts and objects of analysis.

In this study, conceptual adequacy does not seek to determine whether Pancasila empirically behaves as a symbolic system. Rather, it evaluates whether the conceptual characteristics of symbolic forms formulated by Cassirer are sufficiently manifested in Pancasila's structure, functions, and philosophical content. Therefore, the unit of analysis is conceptual correspondence rather than empirical causality.

### Data Sources

The primary sources of this study are the major works of Ernst Cassirer, particularly *An Essay on Man* (1944) and *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), which provide the theoretical foundation for understanding symbolic systems. Secondary sources include literature on Pancasila philosophy, philosophy of culture, symbolic theory, political philosophy, as well as academic articles and journals relevant to the study of ideology and social symbolism.

### Analytical Framework

Cassirer defines symbolic systems as cultural forms that enable human beings to understand and organise reality through symbols. Based on this framework, this study reconstructs five principal characteristics of symbolic systems, which serve as analytical criteria for examining Pancasila:

1. Mediating Function: symbols mediate between human beings and social reality.

2. Meaning Construction: symbols actively shape frameworks for interpreting meaning.
3. Collective Dimension: symbols are recognised, shared, and utilised collectively by a community.
4. Experiential Organising Function: symbols provide orientation for action and structure human practical experience.
5. Independence from Empirical Verification: symbols continue to function even when they cannot be scientifically verified.

**Table 2.***Operationalisation of Cassirer's Symbolic System Concepts*

| Cassirer's Concept                       | Operational Indicator                                | Analytical Question                                                                 | Evidence Expected in Pancasila                     |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Mediating Function                       | Connects lived experience with shared meaning        | Does the principle mediate the relationship between individuals and social reality? | Religious, ethical, political, or social mediation |
| Meaning Construction                     | Generates a framework for interpreting reality       | Does the principle construct collective meaning?                                    | Shared values and worldview                        |
| Collective Dimension                     | Recognised and institutionalised collectively        | Is the principle socially shared and reproduced?                                    | Civic education, state rituals, public discourse   |
| Experiential Organising Function         | Guides practical action                              | Does the principle orient individual and collective behaviour?                      | Moral and political orientation                    |
| Independence from Empirical Verification | Operates symbolically beyond scientific verification | Does the principle function independently of empirical proof?                       | Normative legitimacy and symbolic authority        |

*Sources: Author, 2026.*

The researcher did not independently construct the operational indicators; instead, they reconstructed them from Cassirer's theoretical descriptions of symbolic forms through conceptual analysis. The researcher then evaluated their adequacy by examining their correspondence with Pancasila's philosophical structure and social functions.

### Analytical Process

The analytical process followed four sequential stages, as summarised in Table 3. Each stage builds systematically upon the previous one to ensure a transparent conceptual evaluation of Pancasila within Cassirer's framework.

**Table 3.***Analytical Process*

| Stage   | Analytical Procedure                                      | Output                                                                                                                                              |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stage 1 | Reconstruction of Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms | Identify the essential characteristics of symbolic systems from Cassirer's theoretical framework.                                                   |
| Stage 2 | Operationalisation and Conceptual Mapping                 | Translate Cassirer's concepts into operational indicators and map them onto the structure and functions of the five principles (sila) of Pancasila. |
| Stage 3 | Philosophical Evaluation                                  | Assess the degree of conceptual correspondence between Pancasila and the                                                                            |

|                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stage 4      Analytical Synthesis | characteristics of a symbolic system based on the established indicators.<br>Integrate the findings to determine whether Pancasila can be philosophically interpreted as a symbolic system and identify aspects that are fully or only partially fulfilled. |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Sources: Author, 2026.*

### Conceptual Mapping Procedure

The conceptual mapping process connects each characteristic of Cassirer's symbolic system with the structure and functions of Pancasila within Indonesia's socio-political life. The study examined each principle (*sila*) sequentially against the five operational indicators. The analysis assessed whether each principle fulfilled, partially fulfilled, or did not fulfil the conceptual characteristics of symbolic forms based on philosophical interpretation of its normative content, socio-cultural functions, and role in collective meaning construction.

The assessment focuses not only on Pancasila's normative formulations but also on how it operates as a symbolic medium in shaping collective meaning, social orientation, and national identity.

The degree of correspondence identified in this study is classified into three evaluation categories:

1. Fulfilled: All indicators consistently appear within Pancasila's structure and functions.
2. Partially Fulfilled: Some indicators are present, but limitations or gaps exist between the ideal formulation and social practice.
3. Not Fulfilled: The indicators are absent or exhibit contradictory characteristics.

Through this procedure, the study seeks to evaluate philosophically whether Pancasila can be understood as a symbolic system rather than merely as a rational normative system in the sense of classical political philosophy.

## Results and Discussion

### Limitations of the Rational Formal Approach

In studies of Pancasila philosophy, there has been a strong tendency to position Pancasila as a rational philosophical system that must satisfy standards of logical consistency and systematic coherence. This approach seeks to construct Pancasila as an integrated conceptual framework in which each principle (*sila*) is understood to possess coherent relationships that can be explained through ontological, epistemological, and axiological frameworks (Kaelan, 2013; Notonagoro, 1975). Within this perspective, Pancasila is viewed not only as the normative foundation of the state but also as a system of thought possessing a rational structure that can be philosophically justified.

However, this effort sometimes reveals a tendency toward categorical imposition, namely when Pancasila is treated as equivalent to modern rational philosophical systems that demand strict internal logical consistency. In numerous studies, Pancasila is often understood as a philosophical system whose constituent elements have coherent, mutually grounding relationships, thereby forming a systematic whole (Waruwu et al., 2023). In modern Western philosophy, particularly under the influence of rationalism and the tendency towards conceptual systematisation, a philosophical system is considered robust if it shows clear logical relations among its propositions, remains free from contradictions, and has an argumentative structure that can be rationally justified (Rescher, 2001). Applying these standards to Pancasila reveals several conceptual tensions. The values embodied in Pancasila's principles do not always operate as logical propositions reducible to strict deductive relations; rather, they

function as value orientations whose meanings derive from Indonesian society's historical, cultural, and social practices.

First, the relationships among the principles of Pancasila are not entirely deductive-logical in nature. There is no mechanism through which one principle can be directly derived from another in the form of a strict rational conclusion. For example, the principle of Believe in One Supreme God does not logically generate the principle of Social Justice for All of Indonesians in the sense of formal deduction. The relationships among the principles are better understood as complementary rather than deductive. This indicates that Pancasila was not designed as a propositional system in the narrow sense, but as a set of values that operate simultaneously across multiple dimensions of life.

Second, from the perspective of modern epistemology, Pancasila also faces limitations in epistemic strength. In modern philosophy of science, particularly within the traditions of logical empiricism and critical rationalism, the validity of a knowledge claim is often linked to the possibility of verification or falsification through rationally justified procedures (Godfrey-Smith, 2021; Popper, 1959). The verification principle emphasises the importance of empirical support for a statement, whereas the falsification principle requires that a theory remain open to testing and potential refutation through experience. In this context, the propositions in Pancasila were not designed to be examined by such criteria. Statements such as "social justice" or "just and civilised humanity" cannot be empirically verified or experimentally falsified because they operate within normative and symbolic domains rather than descriptive-empirical ones. Consequently, if Pancasila is evaluated according to epistemological standards developed for assessing scientific theories, it may appear methodologically weak. Yet this weakness does not reside in Pancasila itself; rather, it stems from a mismatch between the object being evaluated and the epistemological tools employed. As a philosophical foundation and value orientation for collective life, Pancasila is not intended to function as a scientific theory subject to falsification. Instead, it serves as a normative framework that guides the nation's collective life. Thus, the issue is better understood as a tension between the object and the analytical framework rather than an inherent deficiency of Pancasila.

Third, the rational-formal approach tends to be limited in explaining how Pancasila is experienced and lived within social life. In practice, people do not understand Pancasila through systematic philosophical reasoning; rather, they encounter it through experiences, symbols, and recurring social practices. This can be seen, for example, in state rituals such as flag ceremonies, the use of the Garuda Pancasila emblem, and narratives of national independence that continue to be reproduced through education and public discourse. Through these media, Pancasila appears not as a system of arguments but as a culturally internalised structure of meaning.

Fourth, the rational-formal approach also tends to position Pancasila as a static and closed system. By emphasising consistency and stability of meaning, this approach leaves limited room for the dynamics of interpretation that occur within changing historical and social contexts. Yet, as Anderson (1991) demonstrates, national identity is always a construction maintained and renewed through ongoing processes of collective imagination. In societies undergoing continuous social, political, and cultural transformation, the meanings of collective symbols are likewise subject to constant negotiation and reinterpretation (Samekto & Purwanti, 2023). Within this framework, Pancasila as the foundation of the state is better understood as open to reinterpretation rather than as a final, closed system.

The rational-formal approach plays an important role in providing a conceptual foundation for understanding Pancasila as a philosophical system, yet it also possesses significant limitations. The attempt to fit Pancasila into a modern rational philosophical framework creates tensions around logical consistency and epistemic strength, while also failing to fully explain how Pancasila is experienced and reproduced in social life (Prasetio, 2023). This criticism is not meant to reject the importance of rational analysis; rather, it argues

that an adequate understanding of Pancasila requires a perspective that can explain the dimensions of experience, symbolism, and social practice that accompany it. In this context, reinterpreting Pancasila as a symbolic system becomes relevant, as it explains meaning-making processes that have largely remained beyond rational-formal approaches (Kreis, 2023).

### Pancasila as a Symbolic System

As a response to the limitations of the rational-formal approach, an alternative framework is needed to explain how Pancasila is experienced as a living reality within society. In this context, Ernst Cassirer's symbolic system approach provides a relevant philosophical foundation for reinterpreting Pancasila. Unlike rational philosophical traditions that emphasise propositional logic, Cassirer places symbols at the centre of human meaning-making. Within Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, symbols function not merely as signs that refer to reality but as active forms (symbolic forms) that organise human experience. Symbols have both representative and expressive functions: they not only represent the world but also structure how human beings perceive, understand, and attribute meaning to it (Cassirer, 1944).

Furthermore, Cassirer argues that symbols operate through mediation, bridging empirical experience and conceptual meaning. Human beings never encounter reality "as it is"; rather, they always engage with it through networks of symbols such as language, myth, religion, and value systems. Through this process, symbols create horizons of meaning that shape how people interpret and respond to reality. Consequently, symbols possess their own internal logic, one that does not necessarily conform to the standards of formal rationality yet remains coherent in constructing structures of meaning that live within collective consciousness.

The central premise of Cassirer's philosophy is that human beings are animal symbolicum, creatures who understand reality not directly but through symbols. Within this framework, symbols function as active structures that shape how people think, feel, and act. In other words, symbols do not merely reflect reality; they also help construct social reality itself (Cassirer, 1944). Through symbols, human beings organise experience, establish social order, and create systems of meaning that keep collective life relatively stable. Applied to Pancasila, this premise suggests that Pancasila functions as a symbolic system that structures the meaning of national life. From this perspective, each principle (*sila*) functions as a symbol that both represents and organises a particular dimension of Indonesian society's collective life.

To show that Pancasila fulfils Cassirer's conception of a symbolic system, this analysis uses the analytical indicators established in the methodological framework to examine each principle. Rather than merely identifying each principle's symbolic meaning, the following discussion examines how each *sila* performs the representative, mediating, expressive, and orientational functions characteristic of symbolic forms.

### The First Principle

The first principle, Belief in the One Supreme God, may be understood as a symbolic form that expresses the transcendent dimension of human existence. This symbol not only affirms the significance of religious values but also shapes society's understanding of the relationship between human beings and the divine (Piter & Riyanto, 2024). Rather than merely affirming religious belief, it serves as a symbolic medium through which Indonesian society objectifies and interprets its relationship with the divine. As Cassirer (1944) argues, human beings do not confront reality directly; instead, they experience and understand reality through symbolic forms that organise experience and construct meaning. In this sense, the first principle does not simply represent religious values but provides a symbolic structure through which transcendence becomes intelligible within collective life.

Within Indonesia's religiously plural society, this principle mediates symbolic connections by linking diverse religious experiences to a shared conception of the sacred. The

philosophical values embodied in the first principle possess not only a vertical dimension that directs individuals towards God but also a horizontal dimension that encourages respect for religious freedom, openness to plurality, and solidarity among religious communities (Samho, 2025). Consequently, the meaning of the first principle is not derived from a single theological doctrine but from its capacity to mediate multiple religious traditions within a common symbolic universe.

From Cassirer's perspective, this mediating function is precisely what characterises a symbolic form. Symbols do not passively reflect an external reality; they actively constitute the framework through which reality is understood. Accordingly, the first principle constructs a shared world of meaning in which religious diversity is interpreted not as fragmentation but as an integral element of Indonesia's collective identity. Through this symbolic activity, individual religious experiences become objectified into a common cultural form that transcends beliefs while preserving their diversity.

Therefore, the first principle fulfils Cassirer's conception of a symbolic form because it does more than represent. It organises collective religious experience, mediates the relationship between empirical plurality and transcendence, and provides an orientational framework through which Indonesian society understands the meaning of religious coexistence. Its philosophical significance thus lies not in empirical verification but in its constitutive role within the symbolic universe that sustains Indonesia's national life.

### **The Second Principle**

The second principle, Just and Civilised Humanity, may be understood as a symbolic form that objectifies the moral dimension of human existence. Rather than merely prescribing ethical norms, it provides a symbolic medium through which Indonesian society interprets human dignity, equality, and justice as essential elements of collective life. According to Cassirer (1944), symbolic forms do not simply describe reality but actively constitute the meanings through which human beings understand themselves and others. In this sense, the second principle transforms the abstract idea of humanity into a shared symbolic reality that guides moral consciousness.

The recognition that every individual possesses inherent worth and dignity serves as the moral foundation for just and civilised social relations (Nurak et al., 2023). Through symbolic mediation, the principle connects individual moral experience with collectively shared ethical values. Humanity, therefore, is not merely understood as a biological or legal category but as a symbolic construction that enables members of society to recognise one another as moral subjects deserving of equal respect. The values of justice and civility embodied in this principle are not fixed or static norms. Instead, they continually take on new meanings as social and humanitarian contexts change. This dynamic character reflects Cassirer's understanding that symbolic forms remain historically and culturally productive, continuously generating new interpretations while preserving their fundamental symbolic function. Consequently, the second principle serves as an orientational symbolic form that provides an enduring ethical framework without prescribing a single immutable interpretation of justice or humanity.

Therefore, the second principle fulfils Cassirer's conception of a symbolic form because it does more than represent. It constructs the collective meaning of human dignity, mediates ethical experience within Indonesian society, and organises moral relationships through a shared symbolic universe. Its philosophical significance lies not merely in expressing humanitarian ideals but in constituting the symbolic reality through which justice, civility, and human dignity become meaningful within the Indonesian national community.

### **The Third Principle**

The third principle, the Unity of Indonesia, may be understood as a symbolic form that objectifies the collective identity of the Indonesian nation. Rather than merely expressing the

aspiration for national unity, it provides a symbolic structure through which individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds recognise themselves as members of a single political and cultural community. In Cassirer's philosophy, symbolic forms enable human beings to transcend immediate empirical differences by constructing shared meanings that organise collective experience (Cassirer, 1944). Accordingly, the third principle transforms the abstract idea of national unity into a symbolic reality that shapes how Indonesians understand their common identity.

Through symbolic mediation, the third principle connects Indonesia's social plurality with a shared conception of nationhood. In a plural society, unity is not a natural or self-evident condition but a symbolic construction that must be continuously produced, maintained, and reproduced through collective practices, national narratives, public institutions, and civic traditions (Anderson, 1991; Nanggala, 2023). As a symbolic form, the third principle mediates the relationship between identities and the broader symbolic universe of the Indonesian nation, allowing diversity to be interpreted as an integral component of national cohesion rather than a source of fragmentation.

This symbolic activity gives the third principle an important integrative and orientational function. It organises collective experience by providing a common framework through which citizens interpret belonging, solidarity, and national responsibility despite their cultural differences. Rather than prescribing uniformity, the principle constructs a shared world of meaning in which plurality becomes compatible with unity. In this way, the symbolic form does not eliminate diversity but reconfigures it within a broader collective identity.

Therefore, the third principle fulfils Cassirer's conception of a symbolic form because it performs more than a representative function. It constitutes the symbolic reality of Indonesian nationhood, mediates the relationship between diversity and unity, and organises collective consciousness through a shared system of meaning. Its philosophical significance lies in its capacity to sustain the symbolic universe within which Indonesia is continually imagined, experienced, and reproduced as one nation. This symbolic construction of unity also resonates with the civic understanding of Indonesian citizenship, in which citizenship is conceived not merely as legal membership but as a shared political identity that integrates diverse communities within a common national framework (Winarno et al., 2021).

This symbolic function also helps explain why the third principle extends beyond a constitutional commitment to national unity. As a symbolic form, the Unity of Indonesia continues to shape civic identity by enabling citizens to see themselves as members of a shared national community despite their diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. In Cassirer's terms, the symbol does not merely represent national unity but actively constitutes the horizon of meaning through which individuals understand their belonging to the Indonesian nation. This interpretation resonates with recent studies in civic education that regard Pancasila as a philosophical foundation for forming civic identity rather than merely a body of constitutional knowledge (Sunarso et al., 2024). However, whereas Sunarso et al. emphasise the educational dimension of civic identity, the present study extends the discussion by explaining the philosophical mechanism underlying this process through Cassirer's concept of symbolic forms.

## The Fourth Principle

The fourth principle, Democracy Guided by the Inner Wisdom of Deliberation Among Representatives, may be understood as a symbolic form that objectifies the political dimension of collective life. Rather than merely prescribing institutional procedures for exercising political power, it provides a symbolic structure through which Indonesian society understands the legitimacy, authority, and purpose of democratic governance. According to Cassirer (1944), symbolic forms organise human experience by transforming abstract ideas into meaningful structures that guide collective action. In this sense, the fourth principle constitutes a symbolic

reality in which political authority is interpreted not simply as the exercise of power but as a moral and deliberative responsibility.

Through symbolic mediation, the principle connects the empirical practices of governance with the normative ideals of collective wisdom and popular sovereignty. Pancasila democracy places the people as the source of political legitimacy while emphasising that authority should be exercised through representative institutions guided by deliberation and wisdom (Rayhan & Nida, 2024). The concept of *musyawarah* (deliberation) therefore functions as a symbolic form that transforms political decision-making from a process of competing interests into a shared search for the common good.

This symbolic activity gives the fourth principle both orientational and constitutive functions. It organises collective political experience by providing a framework for how citizens interpret participation, representation, and legitimacy in democratic life. Rather than reducing democracy to procedural majority rule, the symbolic form of *musyawarah* constructs a shared world of political meaning in which dialogue, consensus, and collective responsibility define legitimate governance (Sijabat et al., 2024).

Therefore, the fourth principle fulfils Cassirer's conception of a symbolic form because it performs more than a representative function. It constitutes the symbolic reality of political legitimacy, mediates the relationship between political authority and collective wisdom, and organises democratic experience through a shared symbolic universe. Its philosophical significance lies not only in regulating political institutions but also in constructing the meaning through which Indonesian society understands legitimate political order.

### The Fifth Principle

The fifth principle, Social Justice for All Indonesians, may be understood as a symbolic form representing the collective aspiration for a just social order. From Cassirer's perspective, this principle does not merely describe an objective social condition; rather, it symbolises an ideal horizon through which Indonesian society interprets and evaluates social, economic, and political realities. As such, its representational function lies in expressing the shared vision of justice as the ultimate goal of national life.

Its expressive function is manifested in the values of equality, solidarity, and human dignity that underlie the pursuit of social welfare. Rather than functioning as a fixed normative prescription, the principle expresses a collective moral aspiration that continually shapes public expectations regarding fairness, opportunity, and the distribution of social goods. In this sense, justice is not treated as a completed achievement but as an ongoing cultural ideal that inspires collective action (Amalia, 2023).

More importantly, the fifth principle fulfils Cassirer's concept of symbolic mediation by connecting concrete social experiences with an ideal framework of meaning. Public policies, legal reforms, economic development, and social welfare programmes are interpreted through the symbolic horizon of social justice rather than evaluated solely as technical or administrative measures. The principle therefore mediates between existing social realities and the collective aspiration for a more equitable society, allowing citizens to understand political and economic changes within a common symbolic framework. The symbolic aspiration toward social justice also provides a normative horizon for cultivating civic competencies and responsible citizenship within contemporary Pancasila education (Suryaningsih et al., 2023).

Consequently, the fifth principle fits Cassirer's symbolic form because it not only represents the ideal of justice but also actively organises collective expectations and directs social action toward the continual realisation of a more inclusive and equitable national community. Its significance lies not in providing a final definition of justice but in sustaining a symbolic horizon through which Indonesian society continually reinterprets and pursues its vision of the common good.

**Table 4.***Symbolic Characteristics of the Five Principles of Pancasila*

| Principle of Pancasila                                                     | Representational Function                                | Expressive Function                                             | Mediating Function                                                                     | Symbolic Role in Collective Life                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Belief in the One Supreme God                                              | Represents the transcendent dimension of human existence | Expresses religious commitment, tolerance, and spiritual values | Mediates the relationship between religious diversity and national unity               | Provides symbolic integration of Indonesia's religious plurality  |
| Just and Civilised Humanity                                                | Represents the dignity and equality of all human beings  | Expresses ethical values of justice, civility, and respect      | Mediates individual interactions through shared moral values                           | Provides ethical orientation for social relations                 |
| The Unity of Indonesia                                                     | Represents national identity amid diversity              | Expresses solidarity and collective belonging                   | Mediates ethnic, cultural, and religious differences within a shared national identity | Strengthens social cohesion and collective identity               |
| Democracy Guided by the Inner Wisdom of Deliberation among Representatives | Represents legitimate political authority                | Expresses participation, deliberation, and collective wisdom    | Mediates the relationship between citizens and political institutions                  | Legitimises democratic governance through symbolic consensus      |
| Social Justice for All Indonesians                                         | Represents the ideal of a just social order              | Expresses aspirations for equality, welfare, and human dignity  | Mediates social realities through the collective aspiration for justice                | Directs collective action towards an inclusive national community |

Table 4 demonstrates that all five principles of Pancasila satisfy the essential characteristics of Cassirer's symbolic forms. Rather than functioning merely as normative propositions, each principle performs representational, expressive, and mediating functions that organise different dimensions of collective life. Together, the five principles form an integrated symbolic system through which Indonesian society interprets religious life, ethical relations, national identity, political legitimacy, and social justice. This finding suggests that Pancasila's coherence lies not primarily in logical deduction among its principles, but in their complementary symbolic functions that collectively construct the horizon of meaning for national life.

## Discussion

Affirming meaning as a historical process of particularity and social participation offers a substantive response to a problem that arises precisely from the loss of semantic rigidity in Pancasila's principles. Kim (2021), drawing on Ernesto Laclau's (2001) political theory of Empty Signifiers, diagnoses the discourse surrounding Pancasila, especially Pancasila within academic thought, as persistently dominated by questions of relevance, to the extent that Pancasila has come to function as an empty signifier, without rigidity or fixed meaning. This diagnosis carries a significant implication: Pancasila is no longer apprehended as a system of embodied values, but rather as a hollow vessel whose primary function is to unify divergent perspectives or represent collective identity in a purely formal sense.

The absence of substantive meaning reduces Pancasila to a name that functions without content; it loses its capacity as a theory with determinate philosophical substance and becomes a symbolic placeholder whose meaning is ignored. This condition opens the door to hegemonic contestation over its meaning, resulting in Pancasila becoming available for appropriation by any interpreter, and Pancasila is no longer governed by the particularity and epistemic situatedness of Indonesia's diverse communities, becoming susceptible to domination by whichever voice is most institutionally or politically empowered to define what Pancasila means.

Cassirer's symbolic framework offers a principled alternative to this hegemonic tendency by shifting from privileging one hegemonic contestation of interpretation over another to more deliberative, social practice. Cassirer shifts the emphasis towards the agency of the symbol itself. Within his framework, a symbol operates as an inherently open structure, making meaning available for reinterpretation across historical contexts and always ready for re-evaluation, without being compelled to satisfy the standards of rational-normative consistency. This means a symbol can sustain its functions within collective life precisely because it can renew society's perspective in response to emerging challenges without waiting for authoritative interpretation.

This symbolic contextualisation thus transcends the rigidity of normative rationalism, which tends to neglect both historical process and the diversity of situated contexts. Through Cassirer's lens, every historically situated community occupies an equally valid position in disclosing Pancasila's meaning according to its own horizon of situatedness. This affirms a normativism that is flexible and always open to reinterpretations and revisions, one that does not foreclose the space of meaning but actively keeps it alive through ongoing social practice.

This contextual logic of symbolic process that Cassirer proposes opens a productive philosophical connection to the framework of what Robert Brandom (1998) terms deontic scorekeeping and to Wilfrid Sellars' (1980) account of reasoning about values in the construction of values. From this point, the dominant rational-normative logic of Pancasila interpretation becomes philosophically problematic insofar as it reproduces what Sellars calls the "Myth of the Given" (O'Shea, 2021) or the assumption that the meaning of Pancasila principles already pre-exists, pre-conceptual, and self-evident, making the understanding of Pancasila serve as the unmediated foundation for all subsequent interpretation. This assumption is doubly problematic because it bypasses the processes of abstraction and historical mediation that give meaning its social validity, and it forecloses what Sellars called the space of reasons (Scharp & Brandom, 2007) by disabling alternative variations of abstraction and interpretation that a genuinely plural society requires. Cassirer's insistence on the entanglement of symbols with concrete social practice dissolves the myth of a given meaning of Pancasila and, in doing so, opens the possibility of an alternative rationality altogether: practical reason.

Within the framework of practical rationalism, the construction of meaning in Pancasila shifts its emphasis to the inferential role of concepts within a community's discursive practices. Drawing on Brandom's (1998) account of deontic scorekeeping, every claim advanced within a discursive community carries with it both a commitment, an undertaking to stand behind the claim and its inferential consequence, and an entitlement, a recognised warrant that makes the claim answerable to, and assessable by, others within that same community. Symbol and meaning, in this sense, are never privately constituted; instead, they are always already embedded in a social practice of giving and asking for reasons (Hicks, 2023).

Beyond affirming the equal standing of every community's ability to create a space of reasons to contribute interpretations and arguments to the ongoing construction of Pancasila's meaning, understanding Pancasila's principle as a processual collective activity also performs decentralisation of the meaning-making activities from presupposed rational-formal understanding towards the anticipatory engagement with emerging problems (Sellars, as cited

in Koons, 2026). In this sense, Pancasila can speak not only to questions already recognised and debated within the national discourse. Instead, it is oriented towards problems that have not (yet) been fully articulated or resolved. The symbolic openness that Cassirer's framework preserves makes this anticipatory reach possible, because the meaning of Pancasila is not exhausted by any single historical actualisation; it remains available to be brought to bear on realities that previous generations could not have foreseen or addressed.

For example, the relationship between Pancasila and the natural world. Discussion of Pancasila and non-human entities remains underrepresented in existing Pancasila discourse. According to Mahaswa (2021), the dominant interpretations of Pancasila remain fundamentally anthropocentric in their ontological orientation, positioning the human being as the sole centre of moral and philosophical concern. Within this framework, nature functions merely as a background condition or an instrument subordinated to human interests, while non-human entities are denied independent ontological significance or moral standing.

The consequence is that Pancasila, as conventionally interpreted, risks reproducing a worldview in which the human being is treated as the exclusive source of value, meaning, and ethical consideration, a worldview that is increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of accelerating ecological crisis. Therefore, de-anthropocentrising Pancasila as a mediating function of symbols that bridge empirical practices that emerge from relations between environmental problems and the community that inhabits them enables Pancasila to speak more about the non-human by radicalising the meaning of "diversity" or *Kebhinnekaan*, which also reaches broader ontological diversity instead of strictly limiting the term to cultural or religious diversity alone (Mahaswa & Kim, 2023). Thus, through recontextualising meaning, Pancasila could affirm contemporary crises as concrete realities rather than treating them as secondary concerns subordinate to a fixed meaning centred on economic development or national progress; therefore, Pancasila could inspire action on contemporary issues without waiting to determine which interpretation is the right one for its ultimate meaning.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the rational-formal approach traditionally employed in Pancasila philosophy provides an important conceptual foundation for explaining the logical structure and normative relationships among the five principles. Nevertheless, this approach remains insufficient to explain how Pancasila operates as a living reality in Indonesian society. Drawing on Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, this study argues that Pancasila is better understood as a symbolic system that mediates collective meaning rather than merely a set of normative propositions. Each principle functions not only as a repository of moral values but also as a symbolic form that organises collective experience, shapes national identity, provides ethical orientation, and legitimises Indonesia's socio-political order.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Pancasila scholarship by introducing Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms as an alternative epistemological framework for interpreting Pancasila. Rather than evaluating Pancasila solely by standards of logical consistency or modern epistemology, this symbolic perspective shows that its philosophical strength also lies in its capacity to generate, mediate, and reproduce collective meanings across changing historical contexts. Consequently, this study broadens contemporary Pancasila philosophy by connecting it with philosophy of culture, symbolic philosophy, and interpretative approaches to political thought.

Practically, this reinterpretation provides a broader conceptual foundation for Pancasila education, civic education, and nation-building initiatives. Viewing Pancasila as a symbolic system encourages educational and public institutions to move beyond transmitting normative doctrines towards cultivating shared meanings through cultural practices, public narratives, and civic participation. This approach may strengthen Pancasila's relevance in addressing

contemporary challenges, including political polarisation, social fragmentation, and competing interpretations of national identity.

This study is limited to conceptual and philosophical analysis. Future research may extend the symbolic interpretation developed here through empirical investigations of how Pancasila functions within educational institutions, public discourse, digital media, and everyday civic practices. Comparative studies involving other theories of symbolism or discourse may also enrich understanding of Pancasila's evolving symbolic dynamics in contemporary Indonesia.

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### Ethics Approval

This conceptual, library-based study does not involve human participants, animals, or biological materials. Therefore, ethical approval was not required under regulations governing non-experimental and non-interventional research.

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