



Research Paper

The Role of Belief in the Afterlife in Giving Meaning to Life from the Perspectives of Allameh Tabataba'i and Charles Taylor

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Abstract

The question of the meaning of life is one of the most fundamental issues in the philosophy of religion, and belief in the afterlife plays a central role in its explanation. The aim of this study is to analyze and compare the role of belief in the afterlife in giving meaning and direction to human life from the viewpoints of Allameh Tabataba'i and Charles Taylor. The main question of the article is: How does belief in the hereafter, in the thought of these two thinkers, provide human life with meaning and orientation? This research employs a comparative, descriptive-interpretive method. The primary sources include the works of Allameh Tabataba'i—especially the Tafsir al-Mizan and his philosophical writings—as well as the works of Charles Taylor, notably *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*. The findings indicate that in Allameh Tabataba'i's intellectual framework, belief in the afterlife is interpreted on the basis of ontological foundations and the human being's connection with a transcendent source. It explains the essence of meaning, value, and direction in life in relation to ultimate perfection and encounter with God. In contrast, Taylor—within his philosophical anthropology—views belief in the afterlife not merely as a religious doctrine but as a marker of preserving a horizon of transcendence within a secular world. Thus, despite their metaphysical and historical differences, both thinkers affirm that faith in the afterlife plays a fundamental role in endowing human life with meaning and purposiveness.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The question of the meaning of life has been one of the most fundamental concerns of human thought. In Islamic philosophy—particularly in the thought of Allameh Tabatabai—meaning is understood in relation to the existential end of the human being and his relation to both origin and return (mabda' and ma'ad). From Tabatabai's perspective, worldly life acquires significance only in connection with the afterlife and the soul's journey toward perfection. Without belief in the afterlife, the system of human values and ultimate ends becomes fragmented and deprived of coherence.

In contemporary thought, Charles Taylor likewise argues that the secular individual, lacking a transcendent horizon, faces a crisis of identity and meaninglessness. Adopting a comparative approach, this study examines the role of belief in the afterlife in providing meaning, hope, and purposiveness to life in the thought of these two thinkers. It seeks to create a framework for philosophical dialogue between Islamic philosophy and contemporary philosophy of religion.

2. Discussion

In Allameh Tabatabai's thought, the "afterlife" is not merely a theological concept referring to life after death, but an ontological reality and a higher stage of human existence. Drawing upon the principles of Transcendent Theosophy particularly the primacy of existence the gradation of existence and substantial motion he views the human being as a dynamic entity moving from the material level toward immateriality and proximity to the Divine. Accordingly, the afterlife is not a realm disconnected from this world,

but the ultimate stage of the continuous existential journey that begins in this life and reaches full manifestation in the Resurrection.

In *Al-Mizan*, the Resurrection is interpreted as the unveiling of the inner reality of existence and of human deeds. Death is not the end of life, but a transition from a weaker mode of existence to a more intense and perfected one. From this perspective, the afterlife is a formative and intrinsic reality rooted in the very structure of human existence. From the moment of creation, the human being is set upon a path of return to God—a return grounded in his divine nature.

Tabatabai understands *fiṭrah* as the innate inclination toward truth and absolute perfection. This inclination determines the direction and meaning of life and shows that without reference to the ultimate end, a complete understanding of the human being is impossible. With his acceptance of substantial motion in the soul, he presents the human being as a dynamic reality in constant becoming, progressing from sense perception and imagination toward intellect and immaterial perfection. In this process, human actions and intentions are not merely conventional acts; they shape one's existential structure and determine one's true form.

In the afterlife, this inner and spiritual form becomes manifest. Reward and punishment are therefore not externally imposed, but the natural manifestation of one's existential quality. The ultimate goal of this movement is the "encounter with God", understood as attaining a degree of perfection in which the human being witnesses the Divine presence.

Thus, in Tabatabai's thought, the meaning of life is fundamentally



intertwined with belief in the afterlife. This world is a prelude and a field for the hereafter; detached from its divine end, it is reduced to mere amusement and purposelessness. Faith in the afterlife opens horizons of meaning, moral responsibility, and hope, interpreting human life within the framework of its existential journey toward absolute perfection.

Charles Taylor holds that in the premodern era, faith in God and the afterlife was socially taken for granted and, by virtue of its obviousness, endowed life with meaning and direction. In the modern age, however, such faith becomes “reflective”—a belief that must be accepted consciously and critically, in relation to personal experience. Consequently, the modern person can no longer rely solely on traditional presuppositions to find meaning; rather, faith and values must be reconsidered and rearticulated. Hence, in Taylor’s view, faith plays a vital role in preserving coherence, orientation, and meaningfulness in contemporary life.

Taylor argues that in the secular age, the weakening of religious institutions and the expansion of individualism have precipitated a crisis of meaning. In this condition, the modern individual—no longer anchored by transcendent horizons or traditional frameworks of meaning—experiences life as fragmented, empty, and directionless. To overcome this crisis, Taylor contends, one must re-embrace some form of transcendent horizon of meaning—religious, moral, or ideal—so that personal life can regain coherence and orientation.

For Taylor, human life requires a “transcendent horizon” to become meaningful—an outlook that lifts life beyond everydayness and nihilism. In the

past, faith in God and the afterlife naturally fulfilled this function, but in the modern world such faith has become reflective and subject to reassessment. Taylor maintains that belief in the afterlife is among the most significant instances of such a transcendent horizon, for it gives direction to actions, values, and choices, protecting the individual from feelings of emptiness and aimlessness. Thus, belief in the afterlife can remain, even within a secular world, a source of meaning, coherence, and moral motivation.

3. Comparative Analysis

This section shows that both Taylor and Allameh Tabatabai regard afterlife belief—or, more broadly, a transcendent horizon—as a condition for a meaningful and coherent life, albeit from two different angles. Taylor analyzes the crisis of meaning in the modern, secular world and argues that without transcendent horizons, the human being succumbs to emptiness and lack of direction; such horizons may be religious, moral, or humanistic. In contrast, Tabatabai, with a theological and metaphysical approach, emphasizes that life is meaningful only when understood in relation to divine nearness and the afterlife.

Their common ground is that both subordinate meaning to something beyond everyday life. The key difference is that Taylor offers a social and plural analysis, while Tabatabai presents a religious and metaphysical one. Taylor holds that transcendent horizons of meaning are not confined to religious belief; they can take the form of moral values, human ideals, and aims such as social justice, environmental stewardship, or scientific progress. These horizons confer direction and coherence upon life and rescue the individual from emptiness.



In comparative perspective, Tabatabai underscores the theological dimension and the human bond with the afterlife and divine proximity, whereas Taylor focuses more on the social and psychological aspects of meaning in the modern world. The conclusion is that belief in the afterlife—whether explicitly religious or symbolically/morally construed—can offer an effective response to the contemporary crisis of meaning, rendering human life purposeful and meaningful.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that belief in the afterlife and horizons are meaningful for humans.

In Charles Taylor's view, modern humans, even if secular, need horizons beyond everyday life to have a meaningful life. These horizons can be religious, moral, or ideal. Therefore, both thinkers emphasize the important point that humans need a superior horizon to escape from crisis and achieve coherence and purpose.