

## Epistemological Foundations of Meaningful Life: A Comparative Analysis of Foundationalism and Hermeneutics through Mulla Sadra's Philosophy

Sahar Kavandi<sup>1</sup>  | Mohsen Jahed<sup>2</sup>  | Maryam Ahmadi<sup>3</sup> 

1. Corresponding Author, Professor of Philosophy Department, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran. E- mail: [drskavandi@znu.ac.ir](mailto:drskavandi@znu.ac.ir)
2. Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology Department, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. E- mail: [m\\_jahed@sbu.ac.ir](mailto:m_jahed@sbu.ac.ir)
3. Assistant Professor of Theology Department, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran. E- mail: [maryam\\_ahmadi@znu.ac.ir](mailto:maryam_ahmadi@znu.ac.ir)

| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Article type:</b></p> <p>Research Article</p><br><p><b>Article history:</b></p> <p>Received 25 April 2026</p> <p>Received in revised form 19 July 2026</p> <p>Accepted 04 August 2026</p> <p>Published online 25 October 2026</p><br><p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Mulla Sadra, Meaningful Life, Foundationalism, Hermeneutics, Substantial Motion, Hermeneutic Circle</p> | <p>The meaning of life constitutes a central concern in contemporary ethics, philosophy of religion, and psychology. This article examines meaningful life through an epistemological lens, drawing on Mullā Ṣadrā's transcendent philosophy (al-ḥikma al-muta'aliya). Within Ṣadrā's anthropological framework, meaningful life comprises both objective and subjective elements; the objective element pertains to valuable ends such as connection with the divine, while the subjective element involves the epistemic and affective engagement of the individual with these ends. This study argues that the hermeneutic approach offers a more fruitful pathway to understanding meaningful life than the foundationalist approach prevalent in deontological ethics and consequentialism. The foundationalist model, assuming complete and static perception upon reaching basic principles, proves inadequate for cultivating the subjective conditions necessary for meaningful existence. In contrast, the hermeneutic model—characterized by continuous oscillation between preliminary understanding and experiential contexts—aligns coherently with Ṣadrā's doctrines of substantial motion (al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya) and the unity of the knower and the known (ittiḥād al-'āqil wa-l-ma'qūl). According to this framework, human beings possess no fixed existential degree; through perceptions and actions, they continuously construct their ontological status, moving from bestial to angelic existence. The hermeneutic circle. enables individuals to progressively deepen their understanding of life's meaning, thereby intensifying existential perfection. This analysis carries significant pedagogical implications, suggesting that teaching meaningful life requires experiential methods rather than mere transmission of abstract principles. By bridging Islamic philosophy with contemporary Western epistemological debates, this study contributes to intercultural philosophical dialogue on one of humanity's most enduring questions.</p> |

**Cite this article:** Kavandi, S., Jahed, M. & Ahmadi, M. (2026). Epistemological Foundations of Meaningful Life: A Comparative Analysis of Foundationalism and Hermeneutics through Mulla Sadra's Philosophy. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 20(56), 697-710. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2026.72114.4482>



© The Author(s).

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

## **Introduction**

Philosophical inquiry into the meaning of life spans millennia, with thinkers across cultures addressing this fundamental question. While philosophers have long engaged with life's meaning as an existential concern, the twentieth century witnessed its emergence as an independent philosophical topic across multiple disciplines, including philosophy of religion, ethics, and psychology. The importance of the meaning of life as an existential topic lies within the fact that it affects every aspect of individuals' lives whether approached empathetically or non-empathetically. It can cause major alterations in an individual's network of beliefs, tendencies, and attitudes. The scope of the topic is so extensive that nearly everyone encounters it evidently some time in life. It is a mental concern that people live with for a lifetime.

The universal nature of this concern manifests in the questions that arise across cultures: How does life conclude? Does life possess inherent meaning? If so, what constitutes this meaning? What purpose underlies human existence? Is life worth living? What elements comprise a meaningful life? Contemporary philosophers have developed diverse approaches to address these questions, from denying a true meaning of life and trying to create its meaning to postulating God's existence and connection with God required for a meaningful life.

This article advances the philosophical discourse on life's meaning by examining it through a distinctive epistemological lens, specifically comparing foundationalist and hermeneutic approaches through the philosophical framework of Mulla Sadra<sup>1</sup>. As one of the most influential Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra's transcendent philosophy (al-hikma al-muta'aliya) offers unique insights that can illuminate contemporary debates about meaningful life while fostering productive dialogue between Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. The innovation of this research compared to research conducted in this field is that it presents the meaning of life more efficiently, relying on the epistemological dimension and based on a hermeneutic approach.

## **Method**

This study has been carried out employing a descriptive-analytical approach (content analysis of Mulla Sadra's writings): Initially, after identifying and deriving themes associated with the concept of life from the primary texts of Mulla Sadra, these themes have been analyzed and elucidated in accordance with his philosophical principles and foundations. Subsequently, by exploring two epistemological perspectives, foundational and hermeneutic, we juxtapose them with Mulla Sadra's views on the meaning of life.

Prior to this article, the concept of the meaning of life as interpreted by Mullā Ṣadrā has been explored through several studies. Qāsem Pūrḥasan and Farzāneh 'Ābedkūhī argue that in Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, God is the sole source of meaning. They contend that, contrary to certain naturalistic perspectives, none of the natural conditions or circumstances (such as the existence

---

<sup>1</sup> Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi, 1571-1640

of evil) can stand in opposition to this source of meaning (Pūrhasan & Ābedkūhī, 2012, 69-78). Mas'ūd Āzarbāyjānī asserts that the meaning of life for humans, within the framework of Transcendent Wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-muta'āliya*), relates to the philosophy of existence and the divine purpose behind the creation of humanity. This purpose is linked to the attainment of a connection with the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-fa'āl*), or the Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-quds*) (Āzarbāyjānī, 2011, 117-130).

Sādī Ṣafārī and Reżā Rasūlī Sharābīānī assert that Mullā Ṣadrā, by demonstrating the immortality of the soul, posits that just as the essence of existence is limitless, human life is not confined solely to the material realm. They argue that life attains its full meaning only when it reaches the afterlife and immortality (Ṣafārī & Rasūlī Sharābīānī, 2019, 49-58). 'Alīreżā Dehqānpūr posits that, from Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective, the value of life is intrinsically linked to the existential values of human beings. These values exhibit varying degrees of intensity and weakness. Consequently, the value of life also manifests in different levels and hierarchies. As an individual's existential degree becomes stronger and their essence more noble, their beloved becomes more refined, and their love transcends to a higher plane (Dehqānpūr, 2011, 131-161).

Ālī Tūrānī and Roqīyeh Tolū'ī assert that, from Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective, the existential values of human beings are transcendent and immaterial. Consequently, an individual who possesses an inherent capacity for meaning and knowledge will never experience feelings of emptiness or lack of identity (Tūrānī & Roqīyeh Tolū'ī, 2012, 27-38).<sup>5</sup> 'Abdollāh Salāvatī and Shahnāz Shāyanfar argue that the concept of life's meaning within Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy is characterized by multiple levels. This diversity arises from Mullā Ṣadrā's anthropological perspective, which does not regard humanity as a singular type (Salāvatī & Shāyanfar, 2015, 69-82).

## Lexicology

Analytic philosophers have introduced different interpretations for the concepts of "meaning" and "life" and the phrase "meaning of life." Linguists have also defined and used them differently. In this regard, the definitions for these words are briefly discussed in accordance with their applications in this paper. Moreover, the favored interpretation of the meaning of life is examined from Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective.

## Concept of Meaning

Meaning is either an abstract concept or secondary intelligible (*ma'qūl thānī*). In the numerous definitions of "meaning," "value," "purpose," and "function" are among the most discussed, and their use in "meaning of life" has led to either meaningful lives or meaningless lives as distinguished from others (Metz, 2015, 16).

### Value

By definition, an individual can have a meaningful life by connecting with what is considered valuable such as God, nature, sacred objects, and culture. Value is categorized into

personal value and universal value. Personal value only has merit, importance, and implication for a person. However, universal value refers to everything that is valuable for many people and deserves sacrifice. These kinds of values are recommended to others, like faith in God among Muslims and reaching Nirvana among Buddhists. Some universal values are ideal inherently, originally, and in themselves such as inner peace, while some are instrumental in the service of greater values such as the actions that people take to achieve happiness. Generally, proponents of naturalism advocate meaning-making of personal values, and exponents of supernaturalism uphold universal supernatural values ( Bayat, 2015, 77-78).

Some philosophers believe that reflecting on the relationship between life and its meaning leads to the conclusion that an individual's life has positive meaning only if (1) it has an inherent positive value and (2) For someone who has that life, it must be good overall. All monotheistic religions claim that the first condition is met by the fact that God is absolute All Good and human beings, as his creations, are also good. Thus, every individual's life is sacred and has inherent positive values. The second condition is met by the combination of two doctrines: The doctrine of salvation states that no one will remain in hell forever, and the doctrine of the afterlife maintains that everyone will have an overall good life in the hereafter (Quinn, 2000, 53-68). In the perspectives of these philosophers, the continuation of life after death seems necessary for positive axiological meaning and absolute positive meaning.

Robert Nozick argues that the intrinsic value of something lies within its organic unity. The organic unity of something is evaluated based on its multiplicity and the unity that comes with the former. Accordingly, the life of a human being is more valuable and even has more potential value than, say, the life of a tree because of its complexity and simultaneously further physical and spiritual aspects. In addition, meaning results from the relationship of something with other things outside itself. Therefore, an individual's life is meaningful through his relationships with other people. However, the ultimate meaning results merely from the final relationship with something outside us having infinite value. As the meaning results from a unifying relationship with values outside us, it elevates value. Thus, the amount of value resulting from our relationship with the infinite value is proportionate to the amount of unity resulting from that relationship (Runzo, 2000, 187-201).

## **Purpose**

Defining "meaning" as purpose is originally and generally used for creatures equipped with knowledge and will. A creature with knowledge and will can both seek purpose in actions (self-purpose) and their creator can pursue a purpose by their creation (external purpose). Accordingly, purpose in "the meaning of life" refers to what purpose(s) an individual would need to achieve a meaningful life and/or what the purpose of God is by creating him.

The distinction between axiological and teleological questions is crucial in "the meaning of life." In other words, is human life good and does it serve a purpose? Philip L. Quinn addresses these questions and argues that human life is meaningful if: (1) it has purposes that are seen as

important and accessible and (2) it has actions, done eagerly, directed towards achieving these purposes. He then highlights Paul Edwards's distinction between extrovertive and introvertive meanings of valuable life. In the former, an individual's life is valuable when it is attached to purposes that are achievable and have positive value. In the latter, an individual's life is valuable when they are attached to purposes that they consider important and are achievable for them (Bayat, 2015, 77-78). Quinn argues that an individual's life is positively meaningful teleologically only if it meets a third condition in addition to the two above conditions: (3) these purposes have positive values (Quinn, 2000, 38-53).

The review of the "meaning of life" based on values as well as purposes and ends brings about the question of whether we can combine and unite the teleological and axiological meanings to have a "valuable purpose." Quinn addresses this question and maintains that the teleological and axiological conditions are separately necessary conditions for a meaningful life and that their unification is the sufficient condition for a positive meaningful life. In other words, an individual's life has "absolute positive meaning" only if it has both axiological and teleological positive meanings. He believes that life can have more than one meaning, for these two meanings have different kinds of meanings conceptually (Quinn, 2000, 189-190).

#### *Function*

Function is another definition of "meaning" that refers to the role and use of something in a larger set, say, the role and function of evil in the universe. Function in the meaning of life refers to the roles of human beings or types in the universe. It deals with an individual's role as a part of the universe in this large set.

### **Meaning of Life**

According to the three interpretations discussed above, theories of "meaning of life" are categorized into "value of life," "purpose of life," and "function of life." If we consider life an action, we can ask about the value of life, despite all difficulties. Is life worth living? Given different definitions of value and its hierarchical qualities, the concept of the meaning of life is different. Whatever reinforces and extends existential aspects of human beings has value. In this regard, affairs like closeness to and connection with the transcendental being, valuable quality or action, and valuable identity can be considered standards and measures of the value of life.

Numerous philosophers have introduced various interpretations and theories of value in the notion of the value of life. Thaddeus Metz regards the value of life as "great respect and honor" in life (Metz, 2001, 150). Robert Nozick considers it "transcending human limits and engaging with valuable affairs" (Nozick, 1981, 601). John Cottingham provides several interpretations of value and finally argues that the meaning of life is to have "a life with valuable purposes" (Cottingham, 2003, 66). John Martin Fischer refers to "aesthetic value" and holds an atomic aesthetic view of life, which includes every individual's knowledge and free will concerning their future and not their whole life (Fischer, 2005, 380).

Considering the above discussions on the meaning of life as the purpose of life, Edwards distinguishes between meaningful human life and positive meaningful human life. He states that the three mentioned conditions are necessary for a positive meaningful life. He also believes that purposes **for** human life should be distinguished from purposes **in** human life. Generally, the naturalist approach believes in the “purpose in the life of every individual,” and the supernaturalist approach seeks to prove the “purpose of God for the life of human beings or types.” When one asks whether life is meaningful, one seeks to know if there is an intelligence above the human intelligence that has created humans and other creatures for the realization of an ultimate end. They seek to know if their role is like the role of pieces of an instrument (or its player) in a symphony (Edwards, 1967, 473).

According to this view, believers think that God has determined purpose or purposes for human life given God’s knowledge and dominance over human life. They believe that God has created them to achieve certain goals. Thus, for them, human life is meaningful to the extent to which one is capable in actualizing these divine purposes for themselves. In another approach, human beings lack the absolute knowledge and dominance over all aspects of their lives and others’ and can merely give meaning to their lives by setting minor and periodic goals and actualizing them. Thus, in this view, the meaning of life is directly related to how successful one is in achieving their goals.

The “value of life” and the “purpose of life” have been discussed more often than the “function of life” by different philosophers. Apparently, given the meaning of function and the necessity of considering and comparing an object with the larger set to determine the role and function of that object, the purpose is preceded by function in a set. As a result, “function of life” follows “purpose of life” and the function and role of an individual depend on the actualization of purpose(s) on an extensive level such as the divine plan. Perceiving the purpose of God by creation and the role and position of human beings in actualizing this purpose seem essential for explaining the meaning of life.

Overall, it can be argued that although numerous views have been put forward about the meaning of life, the definition that most researchers in the field have accepted is: the meaning of life rests in the ultimate positive values that can emerge in human life (Metz, 2015, 15). The meaningful life appears to have two main elements: (1) the objective element and (2) the subjective element. The objective element has to be something valuable, whereas the subjective element results from an individual’s disposition towards that objective element, i.e., cognition, emotions, feelings, and tendencies. Should one of the elements be absent, life will not be meaningful. In case of the absence of the objective element, one may attach desires and emotions to an illusory affair (Metz, 2015, 41-43). If the subjective element is absent, one cannot connect with the objective element, leading to lack of meaningfulness.

Common views about the meaning of life can be categorized into three groups: naturalism, supernaturalism, and nihilism (Metz, 2015, 30)<sup>1</sup>. Naturalists and supernaturalists believe in the meaningfulness of life. The former search meaning in this life and believe that the world has the necessary and sufficient conditions to make life meaningful; however, the latter tie meaning to transcendental affairs such as God and believe that nature lacks what is worth human beings and consequently the conditions of making life meaningful. Nihilists believe that the world is meaningless and valueless; thus, they do not see life as valuable. In the following section, we will first outline the theory derived from Mulla Sadra's thoughts on the meaning of life, and the proposition of this paper will be discussed accordingly.

### Meaningful Life in Mullā Ṣadrā's Perspective

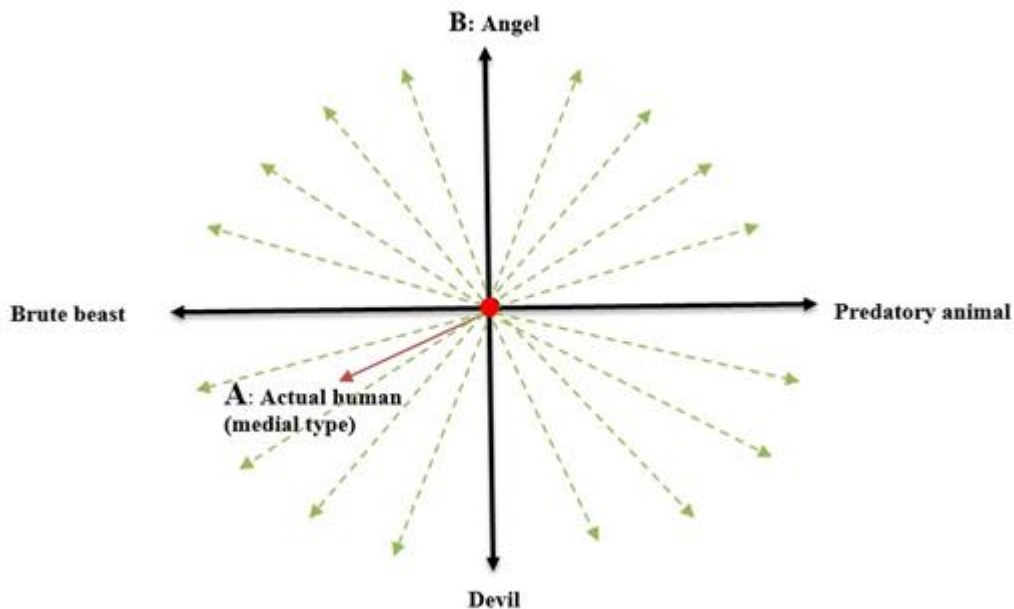
Considering the firm relationship of Ṣadrā's anthropology and the hierarchical difference of human beings from the meaning of life and the search for meanings ingrained in human nature and existential degree, human beings and the course of perfecting of humans in Ṣadrā's perspective could briefly be examined. The perfecting of the human soul (*istikmal al-nafs al-insāniyya*) in Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective can be explained as follows. The essential (substantial) form of the seed in a developmental movement switch and takes a particular form of existence in every stage. First, it has a natural and mineral form, and then it gains a vegetative rank with the emergence of more qualities. With further transitions, it gains animal qualities. In this stage, the baby or the embryo is an actual animal and a potential corporeal human. Then, with perceptions and the use of practical intelligence (reason) and the establishment of inner qualities and morality, it becomes an actual human either a transcendent human (angelic) or a lowly human (demonic) (Shīrāzī, 2000. Ch. 8, 137-138).

This existential transition is in a way that the end of one degree is the beginning of another. This happens only with the connective substantial motion (movement) and the existential intensification of nature. In fact, this is the essential movement of all natural affairs towards good and perfection. In Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical system, human soul (*al-nafs*) has no certain level and fixed existential degree. Rather it has different levels and degrees, and a certain nature is derived from every level. However, other creatures, e.g., objects, intelligible or even non-human souls like plants and animals, have a specific nature and existential degree (Shīrāzī, 2000, Ch. 8, 343). This is because human beings are the only creatures that make their own selves by their perceptions and actions, experience existential improvement, and gain a quiddity different from the previous one. In other words, the soul is nothing but its perceptions and properties. Perceptions and knowledge-based forms are like warps and wefts that complete the soul, raising it in existential levels. Without these warps and wefts, the soul is not an independent affair as the external world is nothing but the external existents and does not exist without them (Shīrāzī, 2000, Ch. 8, 221).

<sup>1</sup> For further reading and evaluation of Metz's view on the meaning of life, see the article Assessment of Thaddeus Metz's theory about meaning of life (Bayat & Eshraghi, 2020, 45-63).

Therefore, since the soul is united with its knowledge-based and practical forms in Ṣadrā's philosophy, "rationality" ("intelligence") (*al-nāṭiq*) is not human differentia, but Rational animal is the genus for human individuals and the differentia of every person is their "soul," created moment by moment by knowledge-based and practical forms. Since perceptive forms are different in individuals (Shīrāzī, 1981, 223), therefore the souls (*al-nufūs*) or the differentias are plenty, an individual can experience several types in his perfection course. That is, different types of transcendental humans (angelic), or predatory humans or beastly humans, or devilish humans (Shīrāzī, 2000, Ch. 9, 19-20).

Therefore, according to Mullā Ṣadrā, human beings will have different levels of existence after birth due to having different perceptions, feelings, and emotions and the unity of these matters with his being (the unity of the knower and the known / the unity of intelligence and intelligible); Therefore, the human, which is biologically unique species, has different types philosophically and ontologically. Accordingly, a diagram can be drawn for human beings and their ontological status.



The above diagram, as a Ṣadrian model, includes the following points:

- (1) When an individual reaches the human level (Actual human/medial type) after leaving behind the animal level, his movement from point A to be angelic is valuable; the further away from point A and closer to being angelic, the more valuable it is in terms of gradation.
- (2) The more one as the distances from the "brute beast" and the "predatory human" and approaches to A–B horizontal axis, the more ethical value and more meaningful life one can have.

- (3) The course of a human being as the actual human from point A to “devil” is a descending move. This movement is less valuable and less meaningful concerning gradation to the degree to which it distances itself from point A and draws near “devil.”
- (4) According to Mullā Ṣadrā’s principles, any courses chosen on this diagram is existentially intensified and is able to add to the existential perfecting of the individual. However, only A–B is valuable ethically and adds to the meaning of life because there are infinite valuable ends according to the definition given for meaningfulness in this course. Meaningfulness has two qualities in Mullā Ṣadrā’s anthropology: multiplicity and gradation. Multiplicity means that there are several courses in terms of value, though the more the actual human moves on the course of A–B, the more valuable life and, consequently, the more meaningful life they can have. Gradation also lies in this definition. None of these courses are limited and the actual human can have any courses up to its final stages in their perspective and move towards it.
- (5) The actual human is free to adopt any of the valuable and non-valuable courses. This means that individuals in Ṣadrā’s philosophy have “deep free will.” They can choose to be which creature: angel, devil, brute beast, predatory human, and any other unnamed creature. Perhaps, this also indicates that humans are divine caliphate. God has created all creatures in the universe and determined the species but given individuals are free and willful to choose which species they want to be. This is the deepest kind of free will among living creatures. Ṣadrā’s perspective differs from other Muslim philosophers who believe that humans have free will at more superficial layers, not extending to the depth of human being. In their views, humans only have free will outside the affairs of essence such as choosing place of residence, spouse, and job. Mullā Ṣadrā’s definition of free will is congruent with the views of some thinkers on the meaning of life such as those of Nietzsche and Marx who believed that the main component for meaningfulness is “autonomy”(Metz, 2015, 45).
- (6) Like Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy and Illuminationism, intellectual faculty is substantially important in Ṣadrā’s philosophy. Mullā Ṣadrā sees the real happiness of human beings in intellectual faculty as it is the true nature of human. This faculty can achieve real happiness and highest-degree felicity when it knows the highest origin (Shīrāzī, 2000. Ch, 9, 131). Thus, in Ṣadrā’s philosophy, an epistemic and subjective element is necessary for happiness and meaningful life in addition to the objective element. The theory of meaningful life in Mullā Ṣadrā’s perspective can be seen as an objectivist theory tied with the subjective element. It is also a combination of naturalism and non-naturalism as he begins his evaluative system from nature and connects it to supernatural world. (Monazzah & Jahed & Kavandi, 2022, 111-132). The above discussions were to provide an introduction to the main topic, and the detailed explanation of Mullā Ṣadrā’s theory of the meaning of life is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Role of Foundationalism and Hermeneutics in Actualizing the Meaning of Life**

The main question is how we can actualize the subjective element of meaningfulness in human beings. This is a crucial question as experience tells us that sometimes after describing the meaning of life (the objective element) to someone, there is no change to make them take action. Why is there no motivation or inclination? What is the origin of this problem? The problem can be traced in two areas: (1) the emotional; for example, one might be unable to manage their emotions or lack the self-control to achieve their goals and needs treatment. (2) The epistemic; for example, one might be unable to perceive correctly the topic—here, the meaning of life—to confirm the importance of the topic and move in the ideal direction. These problems can be major obstacles in the way of a meaningful life. The focus of this paper is to analyze a suitable model for epistemology.

Among the two models employed to perceive the meaning of life (foundationalism and hermeneutics), the hermeneutic model seems to provide an efficient understanding of the concept. First, these two models are reviewed here with the help of ethical concepts and then, they are adopted for the discussion on the meaning of life. The foundationalist approach uses fundamental concepts and principles to explain ethical phenomena. For instance, when we want to know if an action done by a politician is correct, we analyze it through a fundamental and unbiased principle and in this way, we consider it morally justified or unjustified. Sometimes, this can be shown in a syllogism like below:

(1) An action by a politician is just. (2) Any just action is ethically good (the fundamental beginning of the reasoning). (3) The action by the politician is ethically good (result).

The foundationalist approach to this justification indicates that the one who is reasoning uses the premise (2) as the foundation and that there is no need to continue the reasoning. Since the action by the politician is an instance of just action, it is ethical and there is no need for further justification. This model assumes the perception is complete once and for all, except when there is a mistake in the reasoning, which means what is understood is not, in fact, understood. The second premise is provided in different ways in diverse theories. For instance, it is through reason in Kantian deontological ethics, intuition in David Ross's theory, and evaluation of utility in utilitarianism.

Now the question is if we want to teach ethics to our children and adolescents using these kinds of reasoning, how much concepts like justice, bravery, self-control, etc. can be understood by the learner? How much does such teaching transfer the depth of ethical concepts to the learner? It seems that as studies in virtue ethics show (Hooft, 2006, 34), this method of teaching can only serve as the first stage of teaching practical knowledge like ethics. This method does not include the following stages which are extremely important. Using this foundationalist model in ethical teaching results in the induction of a few principles to the learner and asking them to practice them. An example of this kind of ethical teaching or training is “code of conduct” for governmental offices and organizations. Using this method to teach practical knowledge including ethics resembles teaching driving by only a driving guidebook or training

swimming by only a swimming handbook, which is obviously impossible. Therefore, a more practical and efficient method of teaching is needed for teaching ethics and the meaning of life.

The hermeneutic approach is a great option. In this method, the complete perception of something like bravery is not only through reason, intuition, and foundationalist methods, but rather a primary meaning of bravery is provided for the learner. This primary meaning is inducted through norms, observation, definition, etc. in the learner's mind. Then, the learner is placed in the context of carrying out a brave action, which corrects and improves his primary definition of bravery. In the next brave action, the learner, who now has a more complete perception of bravery, is placed in a new context for a brave action and shows better performance. This new context also changes the previous understanding of the meaning of bravery. This oscillation between the meaning of bravery and the new contexts of brave actions continues, forming the hermeneutic circle.

This fact can be observed among people who receive military training and then participate in real battles. There are immense differences between the meaning of bravery of a soldier in training and that of a veteran. This analysis of hermeneutic understanding can be found in Aristotle's view of habits in the perception of some facts. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sees habit as epistemological: "Some principles are observed by means of induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation and others in other ways" (Aristotle, 2011, 14: 1098b).

This quote shows that Aristotle believes that habits include a kind of "cognitive view" rather than simply serving as a means of pedagogy and conditioning of feelings and desires (Burnyeat, 1980, 77). When, for example, one is in a dangerous situation, one learns how to respond to that situation to some extent. The next experiences also add to their knowledge and after years of being in dangerous situations and their repetition (habituation), one learns to respond in the best way to the dangerous situation, resulting in the actualization of bravery. Certainly, even if the learner had studied ethical books and had a great analysis of bravery, they would never have accessed the understanding of a veteran and could never have responded in the best way in dangerous situations. With the repetition of dangerous situations and proper and better responses by the ethical actor, they both gain a better perception of bravery and internalize it as a trait. From the hermeneutic perspective, being a little brave is necessary for the correct perception of bravery. This can be proved by that when a cowardly person is asked about a brave action, sees the brave action as recklessness and when a reckless person is asked about a brave action, he considers it as cowardly (Hooft, 2006, 34).

Considering the above explanation, the foundationalist and hermeneutic models of the meaning of life can be used. If we want to transfer an understanding of the meaning of life to a learner through the foundationalist model, we can use the above diagram with its supporting principles and fundamentals and assume that the learner is now equipped with a complete and all-inclusive perception of the topic. However, the elucidation shows that the correct understanding of practical concepts is not possible through foundationalism. According to the perception of ethical concepts, the hermeneutic understanding seems to be useful in this topic.

First, according to the above diagram, the learner is inducted into a primary meaning of the meaning of life, whereas the teacher is aware that the learner does not have a correct understanding of the meaning of life yet with this primary image. After moving in the course of A–B, the learner is placed in a context of meaningful life and by experiencing the lower stages of meaningful life, their perceived primary meaning is corrected to some degree. Next, this corrected second image produces more enthusiasm in the learner to take the next steps and be in a different context of meaningful life. The new context adds to the depth of the understanding. This hermeneutic circle. Continues, and the learner experiences newer and more in-depth levels of the meaning of life<sup>1</sup> (Stronger perception leads to more appropriate action, which in turn strengthens the person's being. In the next step, this again leads to higher perception, followed by better action, and this process continues).

The hermeneutic understanding model is more congruent with Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy. In this model understanding is always in transition and is never static. However, according to the foundational understanding model, after the process of justification reaches the basic and fundamental concepts and propositions, the act of justification and understanding regarding the topic is stopped. Thus, there are no new perceptions and understandings of the topic. In Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, based on substantial motion and the unity of the knower and the known, perception can always be enhanced. The stronger and more intense the existence of the perceiver, the deeper their perception will be (Ahmadi & Kavandi & Jahed 2022, 102-105). This understanding subsequently reinforces their existence, leading to an improved grasp compared to previous stages; this process continues indefinitely, highlighting the presence of a hermeneutic circle.

Accepting this explanation with Mullā Ṣadrā's hermeneutic model can resolve many problems regarding the meaning of life such as being discontent with life. Based on this understanding model, an individual always receives new inputs, and his mental life/subjectivity is always different in encountering the world. Accordingly, these affairs are always changing, eliminating any feelings of discontent in any part of life—whether in this world or the other world—regarding their perception and repetitiveness. In this way, this adds to meaningfulness and eliminates discontent.

## Conclusions

Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy includes both objective and subjective elements for the meaningfulness of life. The subjective element is formed by multiple components, one of which is episteme. Episteme can be explained through foundationalism and hermeneutics. This paper demonstrated that foundationalism is both incomplete and inefficient in providing the subjective conditions required for a meaningful life. Accordingly, the hermeneutic model, which is more thorough and efficient, can also be used. This model is more inclusive in

---

<sup>1</sup> Stronger perception leads to more appropriate action, which in turn strengthens the person's being. In the next step, this again leads to higher perception, followed by better action, and this process continues.

explaining more phenomena and components of a meaningful life. It is also more efficient as teachers can if they discern this model, direct learners to the course of meaningfulness.

Based on this, education comprises multiple dimensions, and overlooking specific elements within a knowledge framework can impede the attainment of holistic success in this domain. Consequently, when striving to ascribe meaning to existence, it is crucial to adopt a model that provides extensive explanatory power. The hermeneutic model seems to embody this quality and can greatly aid educators in their efforts to render life meaningful.

## References

- Ahmadi, M. & Kavandi, S. & Jahed, M. (2022). The lack of generality in achieving the status of a perfect human being from Mulla Sadra's perspective; its reasons and consequences. *Journal of Sadra's kheradname* 2, 102-105. <http://kherad.mullasadra.org/Article/24179> (in Persian)
- Aristotle. (2011). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Robert C. Bartlett & Susan D. Collins Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Āzarbāyjānī, M. (2011). Ma'nā-yi زندگي از نازار-i hikmat-i muta'aliyya. [The Meaning of Life as Narrated by Transcendental Wisdom]. *Journal of Hikmat-i Asrā* .9, 117-130. <https://ensani.ir/file/download/article/20150304085105-9978-61.pdf> (in Persian)
- Burnyeat, M. F. (1980). *Aristotle on Learning to Be Good: in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Cottingham, J. (2003). *On the Meaning of Life*. London, Routledge Press.
- Dehqānpūr, A. (2011). Arzesh-i زندگي از نازار-i Mullā Ṣadrā. [The Value of Life According to Mullā Ṣadrā], *Journal of Hikmat-i Asrā*. 9, 131-161. <https://search.isc.ac/dl/search/defaultta.aspx?DTC=8&DC=660375>
- Edwards, P. (1967). *Meaning and Value of Life*. In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, ed. Paul Edwards. New York, Macmillan Press.
- Fischer, J. M. (2005). Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative. *Journal of Philosophical Papers*. 3, 379-403.
- Hooft, S. V. (2006). *Understanding Virtue Ethics*. London, Routledge.
- Metz, Th. (2001). *The Concept of a Meaningful Life*. *American Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Metz, Th. (2015). *Meaning in Life*. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Bayat, M. R. (2015). *Dīn wa ma'nā-yi زندگي* [Religion and the Meaning of Life]. Tehran, University of Religions and Denominations Press.
- Bayat, M. & Eshraghi, T. (2020). Assessment of Thaddeus Metz's theory about meaning of life. *Journal of Philosophical Investigation*. 13, 45-63. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2020.36371.2644>
- Monazzah, M. & Jahed, M. & Kavandi, S. (2022). A Sadrian Analysis of Life and Meaning; Based on the Combined. *Journal of Andishe-Novin-E-Dini*. 18, 111-132. <https://www.magiran.com/paper/2442581>
- Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

- Pūrḥasan, Q. & Ābedkūhī, F. (2012). Ma'nā-yi zindagī az naẓar-i Mullā Ṣadrā. [The Meaning of Life According to Mullā Ṣadrā], *Journal of Sadra's kheradname*. 68, 69-78. <https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/922777>
- Quinn, Ph. L. (2000). *How Christianity Secures Life's Meaning: In The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*. ed. Joseph Runzo & Nancy M. Martin. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Runzo, J. (2000). *Eros and Meaning in Life and Religion: In The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*. ed. Joseph Runzo & Nancy M. Martin. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Ṣafārī, S. & Sharābīānī, R. (2019). Rābiṭa-yi miyān-i ma'ād wa ma'nā-yi zindagī dar andīsha-yi Mullā Ṣadrā. [The Relationship between Resurrection and the Meaning of Life in the Thought of Mullā Ṣadrā], *Journal of Hikmat-i Islāmī*. 1, 49-58. <https://lib.pnu.ac.ir/dL/search/default.aspx?Term=61599&Field=0&DTC=7>
- Salāvātī, A. & Shāyanfar, Sh. (2015). Bayān-i ta'thīr-i insān-shināsī-yi Mullā Ṣadrā bar tanawwu'-i ma'ānī-yi zindagī. [Explaining the Impact of Mullā Ṣadrā's Anthropology on the Diversity of the Meaning of Life]. *The journal of Philosophy and Kalam*. 1, 69-82. [https://journals.ut.ac.ir/article\\_54700.html](https://journals.ut.ac.ir/article_54700.html)
- ShiraziA, M. b. I. (Mullā Ṣadrā). (1981). *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyya fī manāhij al-sulūkiyya*. ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī, 2nd ed. Qom, Markaz-i nashr-i dānishgāhī
- ShiraziB, M. b. I. (Mullā Ṣadrā). (2000). *Al-hikmah al-muta'aliyyah fī al-asfār al-'aqlīyyah al-arba'ah* (Vols. 8, 9). Qom, Maktaba al-Muṣṭafawī.
- Tūrānī, A. & Tolū'ī, R. (2012). Ma'nā-yi zindagī az naẓar-i Mullā Ṣadrā wa Paul Tillich. [The Meaning of Life According to Mullā Ṣadrā and Paul Tillich], *Journal of Sadra's kheradname*. 66, 27-38. <https://www.sid.ir/paper/89304/fa>