



## **Active Objectivism: Analyzing Tabatabai's View on the Meaningful Life\***

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### **Abstract**

*Tabatabai's theory about the meaning of life can be referred to as active objectivism, where a man plays an important role in achieving the meaningful life, rather than merely discovering the divine view about his existence. If the man chooses the divine purpose from a "real life" perspective as his meaning of life, God's purpose and man's purpose will converge in order to shape a meaningful life and the ultimate achievement of Pure Life (al-hayat al-tayyibah). However, if he chooses the unreal counterpart, he will be trapped in an unreal life which is referred to as the "pseudo-meaningful life." It is necessary that human beings discover the divine purpose with the help of conceptual intellect (al-'aql al-nazari), define the essentials of achieving the purpose with his practical intellect (al-'aql al-'amali) and ultimately, choose the essentials with his own free will. To achieving compliance of a man's purpose with the divine goal requires faith and good deeds.*

**Key words:** The Meaning of life, Pure Life, Pseudo-Meaningful Life, Active Objectivism, Tabatabai.

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### **Introduction**

Among the theories about the meaning of life, objectivism is of the belief that the meaning of life is always “achievable,” and man needs to find it. In contrast, subjectivists believe that there is no external or independent purpose for mankind, and everyone should form their own purpose individually. Among objectivist theories, the Discovery of the Meaning of Life theory is a famous instance. Stace (Walter Terence Stace (1888-1967)) has considered the meaning of life as merely God’s plan and purpose for the universe (Stace, 1999). However, various philosophers such as Ayer (Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989)) and Nielsen (Kay Nielsen (born 1926)) do not approve of this theory and believe that a man will find a meaning for his life only when he defines a purpose and tries to achieve it.

We here appear to have two rivaling theories, one which is based on discovering the divine purpose in life, and the other on forging a man’s own purpose for life. But Tabatabai, as a philosopher who has briefly reflected on the “meaningfulness” issue, has gathered the two respective theories in a comprehensive theory.

Tabatabai refers to life as man’s most valuable asset. In his view, the creation of man by God has an ultimate goal of reaching absolute perfection, and if the man achieves it, he achieves a meaningful life. On the one hand, this theory is a kind of objectivism, because it emphasizes an external, independent, divine purpose. On the other hand, it can be said that his theory is based on subjectivism, for it seems dependent on an individual purpose and is based on a human’s definition of his own goal. From his point of view, the real man defines a goal, and surpasses his potential in the path of achieving the goal. In the event that man conforms his purpose to the divine purpose, he will have a meaningful life. Therefore, we can call Tabatabai’s theory “active objectivism,” which is the combination of subjectivist and objectivist theories. In other words, Tabatabai’s theory includes parts of both objectivism and subjectivism, because it considers God’s purpose and man’s choice of the ultimate goal of life.

To explain Tabatabai’s theory, we need to demonstrate a few pivotal concepts. On this basis, we explain the concept of truly real (*ḥaqq*) and the concept of vanity (*baṭil*). Then we will explain the true life and the unreal life. Further on, we will focus on purpose and specify mankind’s purpose and its divine counterpart. For a man to discover the divine purpose and reach a convergence of his purpose with the former, he needs two elements of faith and good deeds, both of which will be explained. If the man uses his knowledge and free will to adapt his purpose with the divine counterpart, he will reach the Pure Life (*al-ḥayat al-ṭayyibah*), which is the highest instance and manifestation of meaningful life for humankind. In contrast, if one follows other purposes –however seemingly meaningful--

he has reached a “pseudo-meaningful life.” The final part of this article has been allocated to this matter.

### **1- Truly Real (ḥaqq) vs. Vanity (baṭil)**

Tabatabai has used the term “truly real” in two aspects: existence and act. Viewed from the aspect of existence, truly real (*ḥaqq*) means a clear immutable (*thabit*) reality, and, “vanity” is an apparently immutable, but mutable unreality (Tabatabai, 1371, 16: 235). According to this definition, anything which is immutable is considered to be “truly real”.

Both truly real and vanity could be considered to be an “act.” An act is truly real when, the subject’s purpose of doing such action is perfection and ultimately, moving toward the divine purpose (Tabatabai, 1371, 12: 41). That said, in the act of vanity, the divine purpose will not be achieved (Tabatabai 1371, 11: 335) and it is the one with no perfection included in it (Tabatabai, 1371; C 4; 88). In other words, the subject has not done the act toward the divine purpose (Tabatabai 1371, 12: 41).

Considering truly real and vanity acts, we could be guided to truly real and vanity life. Regarding the relationship between man’s acts and his life in the context of the meaning of life, we can deduce the terms of truly real life and life of vanity<sup>1</sup>. Life is truly real when a man is willing to reach perfection and achieve it in the ultimate stage of his life. The life of vanity is the one when a man has considered the “life” itself as his purpose, or his chosen purpose is not in accordance with his perfection (or not reaching his considered level of perfection). In Tabatabai's view, meaningful life is the “truly real” type of life.

### **2- Unreal Life and Real Life**

In Tabatabai’s view, the first stage of man’s life takes place on earth, which occurs when God breathed his soul upon him (Then He proportioned him and breathed into him from His [created] soul and made for you hearing and vision and hearts; little are you grateful). This life, as an unreal life, is referred to as enjoyment delusion (*mata’ al-qhurur*) (Tabatabai 1371, 19:164), accident (*’arath*) (Tabatabai 1371, 19:164), grace (*zinat*) (Tabatabai 1371, 164:19 and 224:16), amusement (*lahv*), play (*la’ib*) and pride, and deceptive rain.

Mata’ means anything which is not a purpose by itself, and is a tool for reaching the ultimate goal (Tabatabai 1371, 19:164). Therefore, the universe is not the ultimate purpose, but is a means of achieving it.

Accident (*’arath*) is the properties which will be shortly available and unstable, something which is not of the essence (Tabatabai 1371, 164:19).

The word “grace” (*zinat*) is any essence of beauty which by its demonstration will attract attention. Therefore, the main property of life is

not the attention to mutable beauties and grace cannot be considered as a truly real property for one's life (Tabatabai 1371, 164:19 and 224:16)

The word "amusement" (*lahv*) means every entertaining aspect of life which will distract a person, and so prevent him from the main, important, and useful deeds (Tabatabai 1371 164:19). Therefore, when the worldly life is referred to as amusement (*lahv*), it means that it distracts the person from his greater purpose.

"Play" (*la'ib*) is a structured game to reach an unreal purpose (Tabatabai 1371, 164:19). The games and the universe are both mortal and will not be lasting. Just as toys amuse children in a game, the manifestation of impure life amuses mankind and prevents him from obtaining his perfect goal. Individuals in this game start the game, soon grow frustrated, and finally separate. In the real life, individuals will live together and finally death will do them apart. Just as a game, mankind is seeking the worldly matters with amusement and recklessness. Although the games are all fictional, the individuals involved will have conflict in the game. Mankind will start wars for status and wealth, not aware that they are all pale, fading and mortal (Tabatabai 1371, 164:19 and 224:16).

Also, one of the analogies for vanity life expressed by Tabatabai is deceptive rain (Tabatabai, 1371, 19: 164 13: 318). The worldly life is as the rain which will result in the growth of plants and happiness of farmers, making attachment with everything, while it will only last for a short period of time. After a while, it will make the farmers sad and their produce inconclusive (Tabatabai, 1371, 19: 164 13: 318).

Tabatabai divides the man's life into two parts, considering life's purpose and its relation to death. Tabatabai considers the worldly life as a prelude for the eternal counterpart, real life. As the worldly life acts as a medium to reach the eternal counterpart, it is referred to as unreal life. The eternal life is the man's ultimate destination which is permanent, therefore is referred to as the truly real life. The eternal life will occur after *barzakh* (Tabatabai 1371, 313:17). The most important attribute of such life is being "eternal" (*hayavan*) (Al-'ankabut 64) which means immortal and without imperfection. There is no lack of any kind in such life and a man's every request is prepared even before being asked (Tabatabai 1371, 230:2).

### **3- The End**

The end can be viewed in every act by two aspects: From the aspect of the form of the act as an object, and from the aspect of the considered purpose for the act by the subject who will commit the act in order to reach the occurrence of the ultimate purpose.

Tabatabai considers the world's end and the creation as a whole in the first aspect as a complete act of God. Every creature was created by God

and will ultimately return to him (Al-Najm the number of Surah is preferred: 42) and mankind is no exception (Al-Inshiqaq number?: 6). The beginning of the creation of mankind and his ultimate return to God is a permanent and an inevitable fact (Tabatabai 1371, 49:15), which occurs in a way that is not related to the man's belief and needs. Since the world is an act of God, it must follow God as its creator (Tabatabai 1371, 49:15).

The end, in its second aspect is God's willing of the act. God is giving perfection to the creatures by creating them with a purpose (Tabatabai 1422, 185-130). In other words, the perfection, which is the purpose of God, is the love that God wants to give to his creatures. This theory has resulted from Tabatabai's belief in "self-love." In his view, the Pure Existence (God) is the source of love and since every creature has some portions of the illumination of existence, it has love toward itself. This love is the engine for God's will to create.

With this analysis of the end, one can speak of the purposefulness of God in his act and the purposefulness of man:

**A) God's Purposefulness:** Creation of the universe, as a whole, is God's act beyond the changes and alterations, and is truly real (Tabatabai 1371, 73:15). The divine act is truly real since God has a purpose by his immutable act. God is the absolute perfection and there is no perfect being from whom God achieves any perfection, because God's end is his existence. He is the agent which is perfect in his activity and is the first cause that all the other causes are related to. Because of his self-desirability He is the beginning and the end of creation (Tabatabai 1422, 185-180). Also, since God is the absolute perfection, the creation's purpose cannot be merely entertainment and amusement because God's act is not vanity (Tabatabai 1371, 41:12).

Since God created the world as absolute perfection, the creatures of the world have the end of reaching God. This is the truly real end, meaning that it is adapted and compatible with the creature's reality, and every creature is moving toward it by an internal motion. The truly real end of man is achieving absolute perfection by God's and man's wills converging.

**B) Man's Purposefulness:** In Tabatabai's view, each type of creature has its own special life. All creatures in the universe have a continuous life which starts from the point of weakness and imperfection to the point of strength, where all existential aspects of life are perfected (Tabatabai 1371, 103:1). This is the ultimate goal. No movement is free of an end and what creates movement in creatures is achieving the end (Tabatabai 1422, 182-180). The ultimate goal for man is to reach the truly real life without facing distracting obstacles (Tabatabai 1362, 59:1). If the worldly, changeable life --which is the material one -- is considered as the ultimate purpose, it could be an obstacle and vanity life. But, if it is

understood as the way to reach to the divine end, it could be a part of the truly real life.

Man is a creature which begins his journey in the realm of matter and he can attain redemption by reaching an end that his type deserves through an internal movement (Tabatabai 1371 15: 46). But there is a key point in this case. Human beings have knowledge and free will. They can choose the appropriate purpose according to their existence which God has intended. In this case, the right and divine end is realized. The man who has chosen the truly real end will achieve perfection in humanity (Tabatabai, 1371, 2: 238). At the same time he can choose an inappropriate purpose which means that his end is opposing with the divine end. The man who has chosen such an end will be out of the path of the divine purpose.

#### **4- Wisdom and Free Will**

God's creation of mankind features an end, which is reaching perfection. Human existence has two aspects: perceptual and practical. He acquires his perceptions through reason and performs his actions by his free will. The divine end in the creation of man is the fulfillment of God's wisdom and authority.

God created man by nature to detect truly real life and vanity (Tabatabai 1371 2: 374). God has advised humans to obey their intellect and distance themselves from anything which disturbs their minds and the power of perception (Tabatabai 1371 2: 282). Obeying without thought or blind imitation shall be rejected and the man should use his logic and intellect for identification of each issue (Tabatabai, 1371, 2: 197).

With an intellectual perception and defining good and evil, it is time to choose, which is done by the help of free will (Tabatabai 1371, 7: 79). A man should follow the intellectual way in every aspect and decide based on logic rather than sentiment. He has to control his sentiment by defining the real "good" and prevent doing what is opposing to his ultimate salvation (Tabatabai, 1388, 1: 91 and 92). Detecting the correct choices can be done with the assistance of wisdom and virtue.

According to the subjection of will to perception, the importance of reason appears. With the intellect and perception of the world, will helps human beings to validate their needs. If the cognition of man is correct and the divine goal in the creation of man is correctly understood, he will have the means to validate and act upon his life in order to achieve salvation and fulfill a meaningful life. But if knowledge is not well-established, the essentials of his life will not be proportional to the divine end of his creation, and will lead him away from salvation and meaningful life.

### **5 - Faith and Good Deeds**

Faith and good deeds are two main elements of a man's reach to the true end, which is ultimate salvation. Any other element, or the presence of only one of them cannot result in the achievement of true happiness and perfection<sup>2</sup>. Faith is a complex of acknowledgment, trust, belief, knowledge, humility and docility, and is true when it results in good deeds (Tabatabai 1371, 6:15). By faith in God and good deeds, one can help himself in achieving salvation, perfection and a true end. The faith and good deeds are the activity of intellect and free will (Tabatabai 1371, 157-147:2). They have mutual impact. Deeds are rooted in knowledge and acknowledgment. Knowledge could increase based on and in relation with good deeds, and consequently, with faith. Good deeds will elevate the faith in a person. Good deeds will distance the man from material wishes — and ultimately, from being bound to the immortal knowledge disturbance. Because a diversion from truth in our knowledge causes an immortal disturbance in our life, we could prevent this diversion by doing good deeds. Thus, true faith will be perfected and the knowledge will be elevating and purified with good deeds, and good deeds could be more effective (Tabatabai 1371, 99:3). In this way, faith and good deeds will bring us the true salvation.

### **6- Pure Life**

Pure Life is the promised salvation as a result of the true impact of faith and good deeds to mankind (Tabatabai 1371, 341:12) and will enable one's ability to see the truth of everything. In fact, the pure life process is begun during life by interaction between faith and deeds, and continues from the material world to the ultimate destination of life, which is the realm of unity with God and called Pure Life. Therefore, he will willfully depart from the mortal and false concerns (the material life) and will become closer to his Creator.

The exact and true end and salvation of every creature is the one defined by their Creator. Also, the way of achieving it is prepared by Him (Tabatabai 1371, 78:18). The original essence (*fiṭrah*) of human beings is in a way that all parts of the purifying life process --which is movement toward the universe's absolute perfection (God)-- are bound to the divine act. The man's truth (*fiṭrah*), which emerged from the special creation of human beings, is the same among all<sup>3</sup> (Tabatabai 1371, 16: 286). Based on this unity, all human beings have only one path to divinity. Therefore, the destination will be only one too. In Tabatabai's view, each step of pure life process is a middle destination, and to reach the ultimate destination (Pure Life) we must go through each of these steps. In other words, the path and movement are not significantly separate categories.. There is not merely a

path and a movement. The movement is the path and the path is the movement (Tabatabai 1371, 30:1).

The only way of one's access to God, is the one derived from the needs and requirements of his creation. In other words, God put the inclination in our *fitrah* to turn toward him as the impetus of man's movement. The divine path, which is the path of reaching the real end, is the "straight path. Address?" A man chooses a level of it according to his knowledge and deeds in order to reach the end. These levels differ depending on their place on the straight path and source of truth (Tabatabai 1371, 40-33). Individuals, depending on their level of knowledge will move toward the end and their deeds will assist them in reaching the destination. Each level can bring for people a specific salvation, which is related to: having knowledge of divine truth, righteous manners, good deeds, and pure life in the world, eternity and paradise (Tabatabai, 1371, 8:10). The highest divine end in the pure life process (Pure Life) is a level which is called Paradise in the Quran (Tabatabai 1371, 332:9). Paradise (Rizvan) as the greatest instance of salvation, is the true happiness in one's soul which will appear when he faces God's satisfaction with him. In this situation, called the level of pure surrendering, the soul will not resist and will not be defensive while facing God's satisfaction (Tabatabai 1371, 332:9). True satisfaction is a mutual issue. God's satisfaction with man is because of his following, and man's satisfaction with God is the result of God's satisfaction with him.<sup>4</sup> (Tabatabai 1371, 3: 107). However, if a human's knowledge of the pure life process was wrong, or he chooses a different end from the one proper for his creation, he is trapped in a pseudo-meaningful life.

Tabatabai has also spoken of Divine Absolute Will as the greatest end and need of humankind (Tabatabai, 1371, 3: 107). God wills the true immortality for mankind and human beings should match their willing to it. This meaning is shown in the Quran by Adam and Eve story. The Devil could tempt Adam & Eve by promising immortality, and making them ignore their creator. Adam and Eve are the symbol of all human beings, which shows that the greatest inherent inclination of mankind is immortality.. Therefore, the highest degree of man's salvation and perfection is matching human's desire to God's will, and attaining the immortality that mankind is looking for. Therefore, there is a meaning in the universe which is created by the convergence of divine end and man's truly real end.

### **7 – Active Objectivism in the Context of the Meaning of Life**

As said, in Tabatabai's view of life, meaningfulness is a process that has an end, in which the divine will and human will converge. Since the human is

the special creature and a perfect mirror of God's properties, the Almighty has designed a perfect plan for the universe, according to mankind's inclinations (Tabatabai 1371, 6: 132 and 133; 15: 49).

In other words, God's creation of the universe is in an absolute harmony with man's redemption. Although man is a creature among the other creatures, he is the only creature that seeks the divine end with his intellect and will (Tabatabai 1422, 182-180 and 1371, 46:15). Regarding Tabatabai's philosophical view, the man's movement in this path is not accidental, but he has a substantial motion (*al-ḥarakat al-jawhariyyah*) to reach to his inherent, transcendent needs (Pure Life). The man's soul will move from the point of potentiality to the point of actuality in his substantial motion. Every result of this motion would be considered as activity of the soul. The soul will inherently and constantly reach a new activity (Tabatabai 1384, 58). By intellect and will, one will use his faith and good deeds in order to be placed in a branch of what is called "the straight path," the path which he himself has created. Thus, the man is the one to discover and act upon God's end. This is the objective aspect of Tabatabai's theory. The man is also active throughout the way, reaching a stage of salvation which he himself has achieved according to his faith and deeds, and this is the subjective aspect of this theory. Based on these two aspects, Tabatabai's theory is called active objectivism.

### **Conclusion**

Tabatabai believes that if a person chooses an end for himself and merges it with the divine end, --which is considered the ultimate goal for his life-- he will reach the Pure Life or the meaningful life. In such a life, one has salvation in the world and eternity. The man will identify the divine end of man's creation by his conceptual intellect. Next, he should define the essentials of achieving the end by his practical intellect. In the final stage, he will act upon the end by his will and therefore, continuously moves from potentiality to actuality. Such motion is in accordance with the perfection which God has defined for mankind. Faith and good deeds play key roles so that one can detect the truth with his conceptual intellect, define the essentials with his practical intellect and gradually move toward the end with his will. Thus, Tabatabai is considering man's active role in reaching a meaningful life, while being an objectivist. The man is inherently seeking an end. He can choose to either have an unreal life or a real life. He only needs to choose his end in accordance with the divine end and have a meaningful life by using the tools of intellect and will that are offered by God. God has offered these tools to man according to an exact plan centered around mankind.

### Notes

1. See, for example: ( Tabatabai, Mohammad Hossein (1371) *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol. 4 , p. 88 ; vol. 12 , p. 41 ; vol 11 , p 335 , vol 16 , p 235)
2. As an instance, (Al-Mu'menoon: 1-5): The believers must (eventually) win through,- Those who humble themselves in their prayers; Who avoid vain talk; Who are active in deeds of charity, who abstain from sex.
3. Defects and perfection will be meaningful when there is a common and immutable aspect among the creatures. Should the mankind differ in various times and situations and show no unification, there will not be any defects and perfection and therefore, the mankind will refuse to acknowledge his imperfections and moving toward the perfection (Tabatabai 1371, 268 and 178 and 179: 16). Thus, the essential requirement of a meaningful life is mankind's unification. Mankind's unification means the existence of a common ground in his true needs.
4. Since the worldly capacity is limited, the full realization of this goal will be achieved in the Hereafter. ( Tabatabai, 1371 , 17: 29)

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