

ИСТОРИЯ ФИЛОСОФИИ

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THE MEANING OF LIFE IN THE WORKS OF IBN SĪNĀ

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This paper examines an exploration of the meaning of life, focusing on the philosophical insights of Islamic philosopher *Ibn Sīnā* (Avicenna). While *Ibn Sīnā*'s works do not explicitly mention the concept of the meaning of life, his discussions on happiness and well-being closely relate to such a fundamental existential inquiry as the goal of life. In his philosophical works, well-being is introduced as an inherently desirable and ultimate purpose of pleasures, considering it a necessary and sufficient condition for life to become meaningful. *Ibn Sīnā* proposes that life derives meaning from alignment with the ultimate truth, transcending subjective perceptions. In terms of attaining the real meaning of life, *Ibn Sīnā* believes that true fulfillment is achieved through a harmonious relationship with the Divine, with love serving as the driving force towards ultimate perfection. This research aims to analyze the meaning of life in *Ibn Sīnā*'s works and explore how to attain it.

Keywords: Ibn Sīnā, meaning of life, Avicenna, purposefulness, ultimate happiness

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Introduction

All human beings who are in pursuit of a rational, meaningful, and valuable life at some point in their lives, face these profound questions: What are all these efforts and strivings for? What is the purpose of life? Can life itself be inherently desirable? And so on and so forth. These questions exist because human is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue¹. The most fundamental concern of humans is who they are, where they came from, where they are heading, and what the desired destination is.

The question of the meaning of life is only relevant when life itself is a means to a more important purpose or a higher state of achievement. This could be why some argue that we feel even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer. The solution of the problem

¹ Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*. New York, 1962, p. 236.

of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?) There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical².

We may have reached the limits of science here, but perhaps we have not necessarily reached the limits of human discourse. There is a rich tradition of religious language, both in Western culture and elsewhere, that grapples with the task of addressing what cannot be fully captured by even the most complete scientific account of the phenomenal world. One might say that it is the task of religious discourse to strain at the limits of the sayable. Some kinds of theology, to be sure, have aimed at keeping entirely within the boundaries of observable evidence and rational demonstration, invoking God as an explanatory hypothesis to account for certain aspects of reality (such as order, design, motion, and so on), rather in the manner of a scientist looking for the best explanation of the data³.

Discussion Background

In the ancient philosophy, rather than discussing the meaning of life, another topic was often raised that was closely related to this discussion, and that topic was the concept of happiness. Although rooted in religious texts, philosophers in philosophical works analyzed happiness through a philosophical lens, basing their arguments on specific epistemological and metaphysical foundations. It is somehow the same in the early works of Islamic philosophers; since the question of the meaning of life is a relatively new topic, there may not have been explicit discussions under that precise title. However, they were concerned indirectly with the concept of meaning of life. As one of the eminent Muslim philosophers, *Ibn Sīnā*⁴, in various works, explored meaning of life and aimed to reach it. He talked about happiness in his various works and described the ways to achieve it. According to his perspective, the pursuit of and realization of meaning are synonymous with the quest for happiness. While *Ibn Sīnā* distinguished between happiness and the meaning of life, they exhibited common elements in his philosophical framework⁵.

The perspective of *Ibn Sīnā* on the definition and particular meaning of life is crucial and requires a closer examination. Therefore, I will examine the concepts of “life,” “meaning,” and the phrase “meaning of life” with a particular focus on his works.

1. Life

The first term that needs consideration is the word “life” (*al-ḥayāt*). This term has diverse interpretations ranging from nature, animals, to humans,

² Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London, 1961, p. 149.

³ Cottingham, J. *On the Meaning of Life*. London; New York, 2003, p. 8.

⁴ Avicenna (980–1037).

⁵ For further details, see: Khādemī, ‘E. “A Study of the Views of Farabi and Ibn Sīnā on the Definition of Happiness and Its Relation to the Faculties of the Soul”, *Religious Inquiries*, 2015, Vol. 4, No. 7, pp. 65–76.

which can lead to various interpretations. Life, the characteristic property of living substances or things; it is associated with either a capacity for mental activities such as perception and thought (mental life) or physical activities such as absorption, excretion, metabolism, synthesis, and reproduction (physical life)⁶.

Ibn Sīnā's concept of life extends beyond plant and animal life, encompassing humans, abstract entities (*al-muğarradat*⁷), and ultimately, the Almighty God, considered the fundamental source of all life. In some of his works, Avicenna has defined life as encompassing nutrition, and growth, including all plants, animals, and humans⁸. In other works, life has been described as possessing perception and voluntary movement⁹ (*al-ḥarakah al-irādiyyah*), and in yet others, the origin of action has been mentioned in the definition of life¹⁰. All of these definitions encompass human life. Therefore, considering all these definitions in Avicenna's works, it can be concluded that his concept of life entails nutrition, and growth, as well as life with perception and voluntary movement.

However, a significant aspect of *Ibn Sīnā's* works lies in his delineation of the hierarchical levels of life. These levels, according to *Ibn Sīnā*, vary in their nobility, with some surpassing others. Therefore, life in this world, as perceived by *Ibn Sīnā*, is inferior to the life in other realms. As a result, it can be concluded that his notion of a more elevated and noble meaning of life extends beyond the material life and concerns the afterlife of human beings¹¹.

2. Meaning

Another key concept to explore is "meaning" (*al-ma'nā*). Some Western scholars view it as a linguistic notion rather than a purely philosophical one. This could be found in the works of some scholars in the West. In this regard, they believe that life now has meaning or purpose for life later on. Also my life or yours has meaning or purpose for the life of others. To ask about life's meaning, then, is to ask about purposes relating¹².

Ibn Sīnā, however, defines meaning in the context of life's purpose¹³ as an intrinsic goal, an ultimate aim rather than a stepping stone to other objectives. He proposes that life should be viewed holistically, directed towards a singular purpose. Without such a purpose, life is considered empty and meaningless. Consequently, the value of a life is directly tied to its higher and more valuable purpose. In this pursuit of the ultimate goal, *Ibn Sīnā* embodies the characteristics of a teleological philosopher, emphasizing the final end towards which all life

⁶ *Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*, 2nd ed. Cambridge; New York, 1999, p. 504.

⁷ The term refers to entities or essences that are not physical or tangible, but exist in a conceptual or abstract sense.

⁸ *Ibn Sīnā. al-Mabda' wal-ma'ād* [The Origin and the Return]. Tehran, 1363_{HS} [1984], p. 57.

⁹ *Ibn Sīnā. al-Ilahiyāt al-šifā'*. Qom, 1404_{HL} [1984], p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibn Sīnā. Al-Nağā' min al-ğaraq fī baḥr al-ḍālālā'ī* [Escape from the Abyssal Sea]. Tehran, 1379_{HS} [2000], p. 603.

¹¹ *Ibn Sīnā. Risālah fī al-adwiyah al-qalbiyyah. Min mu'allafāt Ibn Sīnā al-ṭabī'yyah* [Regarding the Book on Cardiac Medications by Ibn Sīnā]. Ḥalab, 1984, p. 226.

¹² Hartshorne, C. "The meaning of life", *Process Studies*, 1996, Vol. 25, p. 10.

¹³ The purpose here is something higher than you. It is what you strive to reach it. So whatever you define for yourself or create would be lower than you. For further details, see: Motaharī, M. *Mağmū'e āsār* [Collection of works]. Tehran, 1387_{HS} [2008], p. 545.

strives¹⁴. Based on his philosophical texts, it can be concluded that meaning for *Ibn Sīnā* fundamentally revolves around pursuing this ultimate purpose. While achieving happiness remains crucial, value and function also play complementary roles in attaining this meaning.

3. Meaning of life

Life can sometimes refer to matters that human beings encounter in this world and deal with during their lifetime. At other times, it means what a person intends from the world and vital aspects of their life. Both interpretations could be considered as the meaning of life. However, one is objective, while the other depends on the human perception.

In this regard, we can divide the meaning in this realm into two types:

Objective meaning

According to this concept, the whole universe has a meaning with all the components for which it is considered. In this perspective, the observer examines the elements of the universe, and seeks its meaning. This perspective is widely used in Islamic philosophy and religious texts. This kind of attitude to the world is an objective meaning for being, which is absolutely not related to anyone's view. This meaning is related to being and creation, not to conceptions. Thus, we need to consider this meaning objective, not abstract; it is only desired for its own sake¹⁵.

Subjective meaning

According to the second concept, this term sometimes refers to the purpose that someone wants to express. In other words, it deals with what the person has intended through their speech, regardless of the meaning of the words. In this sense, a person is considered as a user of words, so their intentions are examined to determine why they have used these words. Thus in this perspective, life is meaningful when a person considers it worthwhile in a mental process. Therefore, the value of life is searched only in the mind¹⁶.

Considering to the super naturalistic approach of *Ibn Sīnā* in the meaning of life, seeking the meaning of life based on this type cannot be acceptable. In his viewpoint, life is meaningful via establishing a connection with the highest truth, which represents the ultimate reality. In his view, everything derives its genuine and intrinsic meaning in relation to this truth, hence the concept of subjectivity is not acknowledged by him¹⁷. Therefore, in this perspective, if we consider life as a whole, it is all into achieving the purpose. In other words, life will become meaningful in its journey toward that purpose, in such a way that considering life without it would be meaningless. In this case, the value of life lies in the purpose that these human beings choose for themselves.

¹⁴ Ibn Sīnā. *Aḥwāl al-naḥs, Risālah fīn-naḥs wa baqā'ihā wa ma'ādhā* [Treatise on the soul, its existence and immortality]. [W.P.], 1999, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 260–261.

¹⁶ For further details, see: Wiggins, D. *Needs, Values, Truth*, 3rd ed. Oxford, 1998, pp. 87–137.

¹⁷ Refer to: Akbarī, R., Moḥles, S., Rasūlī, R., & Moqīmī, G. "Risālah al-ṭayr Ibn Sīnā, farāvāyiti namādīn az ma'nā-ye zendegī" [The Treatise on the Birds by Ibn Sīnā, a Symbolic Narrative of the Meaning of Life], *Ḥekmat-e sīnavī*, 1395_{HS} [2016], Vol. 56, p. 113.

Human beings and the question of the meaning of life

The search for the meaning of life can be better understood by examining the structure of the human intellect in Islamic philosophy. As Šīrāzī argues¹⁸, intellect is what differentiates humans from other beings. This unique capacity allows individuals to question life's meaning, but their understanding is shaped by their level of intellectual development.

Humans possess various levels of intellect: the sensory level (*al-martabah al-ḥissīyah*), the imaginative level (*al-martabah al-ḥayāliyyah*), and the intellectual level (*al-martabah al-'aqliyyah*). These levels, which will be explained further, influence how individuals perceive life's meaning. Someone who remains at the sensory level also finds life meaningful, but their understanding of life is limited to the realm of nature and the material world. Such individuals summarize life in the context of the world and its sensory pleasures. Similarly, individuals who reside in the realm of imaginative level also have an incomplete understanding of life and are inclined towards illusions in pursuit of fame, leadership, superiority on the earth, admiration, and praise. The highest level is the intellectual level of understanding, which is based on wisdom.

This is the differentiation among people's interpretations of the meaning of life. By limiting the intellect and not utilizing it optimally, humans comprehend nothing beyond nature; not even the essence and the hidden aspects of nature, but only a superficial perception.

Discovering the true meaning in life

Ibn Sīnā distinguished two types of intellect:

- Theoretical intellect (*al-'aql al-naẓarī*): this intellect is concerned with cognition and understanding of abstract concepts.
- Practical intellect (*al-'aql al-'amalī*): this intellect is concerned with practical matters and decision-making¹⁹.

In Islamic philosophy, the human being is a combination of two elements: body and soul, which are intertwined within the human. This combination makes the human a harmonious blend of the natural and the supernatural. In this realm, intellect plays a central role in understanding both the material world and the world beyond it. It is through theoretical intellect that one discovers the truth, and the result of practical intellect is the choice of good deeds. The work of intellect is to discover the reality by observing the limits and boundaries of human faculties. Since in the works of *Ibn Sīnā*, the meaning of life is considered to be beyond nature, sensory perceptions, and the material universe, the soul should be liberated from the body and connected to the active intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*²⁰) to fully grasp the meaning²¹.

¹⁸ Šīrāzī, Ṣ. *al-Asfār al-arba'ah* [Four journeys], Vol. 7. Qom, 1368_{HS} [1989], p. 134.

¹⁹ Ibn Sīnā. *Aḥwāl al-naḥs, Risālah fīn-naḥs wa baqā'ihā wa ma'ādihā* [Treatise on the soul, its existence and immortality], pp. 156–162.

²⁰ The active intellect is what receives the intelligible forms of things and makes potential knowledge into actual knowledge.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Therefore, he emphasizes that the meaning of life is something to be discovered, especially when human beings engage their intellect in seeking the ultimate truth and purpose. Those who remain confined to the sensory world and its limitations might resort to constructing meaning as a coping mechanism for the perceived lack of inherent meaning. As we saw earlier, human life exists within the broader context of the universe. Therefore, if we view the entire universe as purely random, without a beginning, purpose, or order, then seeking meaning within this vast and meaningless whole, specifically in human life, becomes a futile exercise. Nevertheless, if we believe in some form of order, reason, purpose, etc., in the system of the universe, then the question of the meaning of human life acquires a distinct significance.

In the context of *Ibn Sīnā's* work, discussions on the meaning of life center around the concept of the ultimate goal (*Gāyā al-gāyāt*), or the final destination of our journey. This journey, spanning from birth to death, is considered a means to reach this grander purpose, referred to by Muslim philosophers as the ultimate goal. *Ibn Sīnā's* perspective differentiates itself from the "God-centered theory"²² found in Western philosophy. While the latter emphasizes the value of life based on its connection to a divine being, Ibn Sīnā proposes a "God-soul-centered theory". This theory emphasizes that meaningfulness arises from establishing a connection between the individual human soul and the Divine as the ultimate truth. However, *Ibn Sīnā* acknowledges the limitations of the material world in achieving this complete connection. He argues that full realization of this relationship is only possible beyond our earthly life due to the constraints of our physical world²³.

How to achieve a meaningful life

Ibn Sīnā believes that when the soul attains access to intuitive intellectual pleasures, individuals can discover the true meaning of life, whether in this world or the hereafter. In the hereafter, the removal of material obstacles and imperfections allows the soul to proceed without problems; by connecting with the Divine, it achieves true pleasure and meaning. Therefore, as mentioned before, the ultimate happiness, which is explored inherently, may not be achieved in this world, because the soul in the sensory realm is limited under the boundaries of body and cannot attain it. Ultimate happiness is found in intellectual and spiritual pleasures. Hence, intellectual pleasures are superior in terms of quantity and quality compared to sensory pleasures²⁴.

Therefore, Ibn Sīnā posits that the highest level of meaning in life lies in the mutual love relationship between the universe's constituents and the ultimate purpose. In other words, the world possesses elements and beauties that go beyond minimal or purposeful meaning and are achieved through the flow of love within all of its parts. Numerous Muslim philosophers, including *Ibn Sīnā*,

²² For further details, see: Metz, T. "Could God Purpose Be Source of Life's Meaning?", *Religious Studies*, 2000, No. 36. pp. 293-294.

²³ Akbarī, R., Moḥles, S., Rasūlī, R., & Moqīmī, G. "Risālah al-ṭayr Ibn Sīnā, farāravāyī namādīn az ma'nā-ye zendegī" [The Treatise on the Birds by Ibn Sīnā, a Symbolic Narrative of the Meaning of Life], p. 114.

²⁴ Ibn Sīnā. *Risālah fīs-sa'ādah, fī rasā'il al-šayḥ 'Abū 'Alī al-Ḥussain ibn 'Abdullāh*. Qom, 1400_{HL} [1980], pp. 261-263.

have elaborated on this topic in detail. *Ibn Sīnā*, in his explanation of the universe and all beings, introduces them in a manner that acknowledges their intrinsic love, whether willed or natural, for their own perfection, ultimately culminating in the perfection of the ultimate purpose²⁵. He has even written a separate book on the flow of love in all entities (*Risālat al-‘ishq*).

In Islamic philosophy, all things other than God are considered possible beings (*al-mumkin al-wuğūd*), meaning their existence is contingent and not absolute. Due to their inherent nature, these possible beings strive towards perfection. This inherent drive stems from their connection to the cause of all causes, ultimately God. As possible beings move towards perfection, they experience a love for their ultimate purpose, which is ultimately returning to the necessary being (*al-wāğib al-wuğūd*), God. This love for the truth is described as “eternal” because it is an inherent characteristic of their existence. *Ibn Sīnā* emphasizes that this love is not merely a hidden or abstract concept. He argues that it can be perceived even in seemingly ordinary natural processes²⁶.

Conclusion

Driven by the inherent desire to understand their identity, origin, and purpose, humans have always concerned with existential questions. *Ibn Sīnā*, recognizing this fundamental human nature, particularly the unique faculty of intellect, delves into the profound question of life’s meaning.

Ibn Sīnā follows the objective meaning of life, and emphasizes on the inherent meaning in the universe itself, independent of individual viewpoints. In this context, the focus is on the exploration and discovery of life’s meaning, and thus, the concept of determining the purpose in life based on one’s own perceptions is not accepted. In the realm of objective meaning of life, even death is not a hindrance to a meaningful life; instead, it facilitates human advancement and growth.

Beyond recognizing the universe’s coherence and purpose, *Ibn Sīnā* proposes a deeper meaning within its unified system. Connected to the necessary being, this perspective suggests a mutual love between the universe’s constituents and the ultimate purpose. All beings, in their pursuit of perfection, share this inherent love for their ultimate goal.

Finally, the suggestion of *Ibn Sīnā* in his works to achieve a meaningful life, is through attaining access to intuitive intellectual pleasures. The ultimate happiness is considered to be found in intellectual and spiritual pleasures, surpassing sensory pleasures in quantity and quality.

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²⁵ Ibn Sīnā. *al-Iṣārāt wa al-tanbīhāt* [The book of directives and remarks], Vol. 3, the commentary of Ḥ.N. Ṭūsī and Q. Rāzī. Qom, 1383_{HS} [2004], p. 363.

²⁶ Ibn Sīnā. *al-Ilahiyāt al-šifā’*, p. 390.

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Смысл жизни в трудах Ибн Сины

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В данной статье рассматривается исследование смысла жизни, основанное на философских воззрениях исламского философа Ибн Сины (Авиценны). Хотя в трудах Ибн Сины прямо не упоминается концепция смысла жизни, его рассуждения о счастье и благополучии тесно связаны с таким фундаментальным экзистенциальным вопросом, как цель жизни. В своих философских работах он рассматривает благополучие как неотъемлемо желаемое и конечную цель удовольствий, считая его необходимым и достаточным условием для того, чтобы жизнь приобрела смысл. Ибн Сина утверждает, что жизнь обретает смысл в соответствии с высшей истиной, выходящей за рамки субъективного восприятия. Что касается обретения истинного смысла жизни, Ибн Сина считает, что истинная самореализация достигается через гармоничные отношения с Божественным, когда любовь служит движущей силой, ведущей к высшему совершенству. Цель данного исследования – выявить идеи о смысле жизни и о возможности его достижения в трудах Ибн Сины.

Ключевые слова: Ибн Сина, смысл жизни, Авиценна, целеустремленность, высшее счастье

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