

The Relation between Freedom and Virtue in the Thought of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and Morteza Motahhari

Ebrahim Kimiyaei Devin¹  | Omid Shafiei Ghahfarokhi² 

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Abstract

Modern man, having been liberated from the normative/ethical givens of the premodern world, accords primacy to freedom. This perspective presupposes the exclusivity of the individual's role in constituting norms, and by denying any prior program, norm, or virtue, it leads to neglect of the social dimension of happiness as well as disregard for the interwoven nature of human happiness. In response, certain thinkers have sought to reconcile the virtues of the ancient world with the freedoms of the modern age. The present article examines the relation between freedom and virtue in the thought of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and Morteza Motahhari, two contemporary Iranian intellectuals. Methodologically, this study employs a text-based hermeneutical approach, with data collected through library research. The findings indicate that, from the perspectives of Tabataba'i and Motahhari, the correlation between freedom and virtue lies in the very essence of *truth* (*ḥaqq*). As the criterion of judgment, *truth* entails unity and the absence of contradiction—both in terms of value and in terms of the possibility of structuring forms of public order.

Keywords: freedom, truth, virtue, Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Morteza Motahhari

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1. Ph.D. Graduate in Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran. (Corresponding Author) (kimiyaei@isu.ac.ir)

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Governance and Policy-Making, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran. (shafiei@isu.ac.ir)

1. Introduction

With the transition from the Christian empires—under the leadership of the Pope—to the modern absolute state, a rupture emerged between the ancient and modern worlds. The consequences of this paradigmatic shift were evident in all domains, particularly in conceptions of happiness. In the ancient world, a mythological-cosmological order prevailed, providing the framework for defining and prioritizing values. These values acquired meaning within a hierarchical worldview in which everything had its proper place and *ethos* (from the Latin root of *ethics*), and each entity was understood in interaction with the other. Within this system, philosophical, theological, and political manifestations—such as the *ten intellects*, deities, and social classes (kings, warriors, and farmers)—functioned within a top-down order that emanated grace and governed affairs. The human essence, subordinated to the will of nature and this mythological-cosmological order, nevertheless gained dignity through its particular *ethos*. The cultivation of virtues and the rejection of vices constituted the path of advancement in this system. For instance, the virtue of courage, like an elixir, elevated the iron class of farmers to the silver class of warriors, while the virtue of wisdom served as the master key to entry into the golden class of kings.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, the transition from the ancient to the modern world began. In this transitional era, a struggle unfolded between *logos* and *mythos*, with the claim that the very roots of myth had to be eradicated. Myths, deemed superstitious and therefore unreal, were to be condemned and rejected, and in their place a rival and formidable alternative emerged in the form of a terrestrial-human order. In this earthly-human system, everything was grounded in the descent of humankind onto the earth. Human beings were no longer necessarily ashamed of original sin or preoccupied with returning in repentance to the gods; rather, they sought to realize the promise of paradise on earth through their own hands.

In this worldview, humankind acquired intrinsic dignity and authenticity by virtue of liberation from classical constraints—unlike in the mythological-cosmological order, where authenticity was acquired extrinsically. Consequently, all individuals, equal in their liberation and freedom, possessed self-respect. Within this horizontal worldview, each person became the center and focal point of existence, and social order was established from the bottom up, on the basis of individual will and desire, through what came to be known as the social contract.

In this sense, freedom may be regarded as the dividing line between the ancient and modern worlds. Given that each of these systems carried both merits and shortcomings, the central question arose: What relation should be established

between the virtue of the ancient world and the freedom of the modern world so that modern man might benefit from the advantages of both? Numerous scholars, with differing formulations, have attempted to address this very question.

The relation between freedom and virtue in the modern world can be examined based on two approaches: as values and as forms of public order. According to the first, value-based approach, freedom and virtue are complementary. In the modern world, if freedom is understood as autonomy independent of coercive social regulations, it constitutes a necessary precondition for virtue, since virtue cannot exist without moral/normative choice. Conversely, virtue is ultimately essential for the sustenance of freedom; when the social fabric is imbued with moral virtues, external or governmental supervision diminishes, and reduced oversight leads to an expansion of freedom.

In the second approach, if freedom and virtue are conceptualized from a social perspective as forms of public order that structure and regulate the various dimensions of individual, familial, social, and political life, they coexist independently and alongside one another, as noted above.

Exploring this domain from the standpoint of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and Morteza Motahhari and identifying the strategic capacities of their thought has both theoretical and practical significance. The philosophical and interpretive reflections of these two thinkers, in the context of liberal and communist worldviews of their times, have inspired a new order for Muslims—an order capable of offering a viable alternative and engaging in argumentation with other existing options.

It is therefore necessary, from the perspectives of Tabataba'i and Motahhari, to examine the relation between freedom and virtue. Are they, as in the modern world, complementary in value and parallel in structuring public order? Accordingly, the notion of virtue is first analyzed. In the interpretive and philosophical thought of Tabataba'i and Motahhari, virtue is derived from the moral philosophy. Subsequently, the notion of freedom, emerging from the philosophy of human creation, is discussed. Finally, the relation between these two notions is elucidated in accordance with the interpretive thought of Tabataba'i and Motahhari.

1.1. Methodology

The present study is based on a text-centered interpretive method, while data collection relies on a library-based examination of the relevant sources. The text-centered interpretive method is a branch of hermeneutics that enables an objective and trans-historical understanding of the text. It makes possible access to the author's intent, prioritizes "authorial intention" in interpretation on the basis of the primary

meaning of the text, resolves differences of understanding according to the main purposes of the speaker, and allows for the identification of unequivocal meanings and the interpretation of ambiguous expressions in light of them (Nosratpanah and Bakhshi 2018, 20–21).

In accordance with this method, the usages of the terms virtue and freedom in the works of Tabataba'i and Motahhari are examined, and the conclusions of the study are then derived on the basis of the interpretive and philosophical principles of their thought. The necessity of employing such a method lies in the fact that, for instance, Motahhari does not provide a precise technical definition of virtue. Nevertheless, through a careful review of his works and by identifying the foundational principles of his intellectual system, such a meaning can be properly extracted.

1.2. Literature Review

Two articles by Azizi and Noori Sari (2015a; 2015b) employ the concepts of happiness and freedom in order to explain liberalism and communitarianism. The present study, however, seeks to demonstrate the compatibility of the theoretical foundations and intellectual presuppositions of Tabataba'i and Motahhari. It should be noted that virtue is not equivalent to happiness but rather the path leading to it.

John Morse (2003) argues that virtue theory, even when emphasized in a communitarian sense, can generate an account of individual freedom. According to him, reflection—which represents individual freedom—derives from a set of traits and skills that are not innate but must be cultivated through education and practice. Both society and the individual, in close interaction with each other, must therefore be able to develop the capacity to alter their mode of reflection. Morse maintains that virtuous citizens should turn to the state only as a last resort. In fact, the issue must be sufficiently significant, and all private alternatives demonstrably inadequate, for state intervention to be warranted and justified (Morse 2003, 105–145).

Christian Lyman (2020) concludes that both freedom and virtue are necessary for attaining maximum happiness, but freedom takes precedence over virtue. He argues that the compulsory conformity of behavior to certain moral norms does not constitute genuine virtue; rather, adherence to such norms must be voluntary.

A review of these studies reveals that no independent research has yet been conducted with the aim of examining the possibility of reconciling freedom and virtue from the perspectives of Tabataba'i and Motahhari. The present study is therefore innovative in its problem, purpose, and methodology.

2. Virtue Ethics

Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and Morteza Motahhari approach virtue through moral philosophy. Ethics consists of stable dispositions (*malakāt*) and fixed psychic dispositions formed by the conjunction of knowledge and action in the direction of happiness (Tabataba'i 1992, 116). Accordingly, if beliefs are lost, the traits arising from them vanish; and if actions are abandoned, the corresponding disposition declines.

In Tabataba'i's view, ethics belongs to the category of philosophical secondary intelligibles (*al-ma'qūlāt al-thāniya al-falsafiyya*)¹, because its predication (*'urūd*) is in the mind while its qualification (*ittisāf*) is in external reality; it is abstracted through a comparison between an act and its intended end (Mesbah Yazdi 2010, 199).

Ethics, for Tabataba'i, arises from three general faculties that impel the human being toward action: the appetitive faculty (*al-quwwa al-shahawiyya*), the irascible faculty (*al-quwwa al-ghaḍabiyya*), and the rational faculty (*al-quwwa al-'aqliyya*). The appetitive faculty undertakes desiring and attracting benefit (e.g., eating, drinking, clothing); the irascible faculty seeks to repel harm and to actualize "not-wanting," as in defending life, property, and honor; and the rational faculty is responsible for conceptualization and assent in order to guide action (Tabataba'i 1995, 558–559). Since the human being is a composite of these three faculties, excess or deficiency in any of them deflects one from happiness.

Observing the mean in the appetitive faculty—by avoiding greed and sloth—produces the chastity virtue (*'iffa*). Observing the mean in the irascible faculty—by avoiding rashness and cowardice—yields courage. Observing the mean in the rational faculty—by avoiding cunning and dullness—generates the virtue of wisdom (Tabataba'i 1995, 559–560). Finally, through the realization and integration of the three virtues—chastity virtue, courage, and the virtue of wisdom—the virtue of justice is attained in the soul (Tabataba'i 1995, 560).

According to Tabataba'i, these four virtues are the fundamental principles of virtue, while other virtues are their derivatives, related as species to genus. Since virtues are psychic dispositions, their acquisition requires repetition and habituation. With respect to how virtues are realized and vices avoided, Tabataba'i proposes a classification of virtue based on whether virtues are subject to absolutism or relativism in moral philosophy (Tabataba'i 1995, 561).

2.1. Virtue in Ethical Absolutism

In this classification of ethics, moral virtues are considered absolute and are not

contingent upon specific conditions or circumstances. Here, conventional notions are grounded in the pursuit of real interests. According to Motahhari, virtues, owing to the gradational nature of knowledge, are themselves gradational yet at the same time absolute (Sheikholislami et al. 2020, 106). Since the degrees of knowledge correspond to that of existence, absolute virtue is divided, in light of the hierarchy of existence, into three categories: material, imaginal, and intellectual. Tabataba'i does not provide specific names for these three categories but merely describes their characteristics.

2.1.1. Material Virtue

This category of virtue, derived from Aristotelian ethics, regards the aim of self-purification and refinement of the soul as the pursuit of worldly benefits and the avoidance of worldly harms. Here, virtue revolves around the principle of moderation and seeks a conjunctural perfection together with social acceptance. In this sense, the virtuous person strives for approval and praise while avoiding people's blame and censure (Tabataba'i 1995, 1: 561). Motahhari, in his critique of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, draws attention to its material orientation and the impossibility of applying moderation to all cases (Motahhari 1988, 48)—for instance, truthfulness versus falsehood, where excess does not exist.

2.1.2. Imaginal Virtue

Like material virtue, imaginal virtue manifests the synthesis of the threefold virtues—chastity, courage, and wisdom—in the higher virtue of justice. The difference, however, lies in its ultimate end: here, the true and genuine perfection is otherworldly happiness, which is constantly emphasized to human beings through the warnings and glad tidings of the divine prophets (Tabataba'i, 1995, 1: 561). On this basis, moral virtues and vices discipline the human faculties in accordance with eternal happiness or eternal wretchedness.

2.1.3. Intellectual Virtue

Tabataba'i considers this category of virtue to be specific to Islam and the Qur'an. In it—unlike the two previous categories—justice is not the sum of all virtues; rather, the criterion for distinguishing virtues from vices is divine love and satisfaction, not worldly praise or otherworldly happiness. As Tabataba'i states:

... Thus, his aims differ from those of other people, for up to now, like everyone else, whatever he did, he did it for the sake of his own perfection; he did it in order to attain a human virtue. If he refrained from some act or avoided some disposition, it was because that act or disposition was a vice. But now, whatever he does, he does it because his Beloved loves it, and whatever he refrains from, he refrains from because his Beloved dislikes it. In short, all his concern is the Beloved: neither virtue

nor vice matters to him, neither people’s praise nor their congratulations and good remembrance. He has no attention to this world or to the hereafter, no paradise before him and no hell. Day by day his abasement in servitude and proof of love increase. (Tabataba’i 1995, 1: 562–563)

2-2. Virtue in Ethical Relativism

Here, moral values are variable, and *mental constructs* (*al-umūr al-i’tibārī*) are established without any objective or real standard. Moral principles possess no universal or general validity; they are only dependent on taste, culture, and the requirements of time and place. Tabataba’i regards this as a sociological approach which, due to its materialist foundations, is fundamentally rejected. According to Tabataba’i, in this approach moral qualities are defined in light of the diverse aims of each society, and even a single society can, in different periods of time, pursue varying aims and thereby adopt different virtues and vices (Ahmadi 2022, 244). Consequently, since nature is in a state of transformation, social laws inevitably change, and with this change, moral good and evil also alter in accordance with the development of society (Tabataba’i 1995, 1: 563–564). In this category, the four cardinal virtues and the Aristotelian theory of the mean do not necessarily enjoy any permanent endorsement; rather, in some historical periods this theory may have been preferred in certain societies.

2-3. Conclusion

Based on Table 1, the concept of virtue in Tabataba’i and Motahhari’s perspectives can be outlined in terms of its absolute or relative nature, foundation, types, and ultimate end. It may thus be concluded that the methodological understanding of virtue, according to both Tabataba’i and Motahhari, is intrinsically tied to the philosophy of the mission of divine prophets. In this classification, Tabataba’i does not draw a sharp

Table 1. Classification of Virtue from the Perspective of Tabataba’i and Motahhari

| Absolute/Relative | Based on | Types | End |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Ethical Absolutism | Gradational levels of existence | Material virtue | Conjectural perfection and social acceptance |
| | | Imaginal virtue | Real perfection and otherworldly happiness |
| | | Intellectual virtue | Divine satisfaction |
| Ethical Relativism | Historical materialism | Sociological virtue | Particular tastes and culture of each society |

boundary between imaginal and intellectual virtue; he merely identifies the latter as the distinctive method of the Qur'an and Islam. This is because if the ultimate end is the attainment of divine satisfaction, imaginal virtue likewise realizes this aim, though with comparatively lesser intensity (Ahmadi 2022, 255).

3. Freedom

Tabataba'i views freedom as deriving from a faculty called *will* (*irāda*), which impels the human being toward action, and whose suppression effaces the very humanity of man (Tabataba'i 2000, 12). He regards this will as a consequence of man's divine vicegerency (*khilāfa*). Accordingly, the appointment of man as God's vicegerent means that man inclines toward the position of *fa'āl mā yashā'* ("the one who acts as he wills") across all levels of existence. In the *world of pre-existence* (*'ālam al-dharr*), the human being comes to know—through *knowledge by presence* (*al-'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*)—that this capacity for acting as he wills has been granted to him only derivatively, and that he does not independently possess such a station.

In the *descending arc* (*qaws al-nuzūl*)², at each ontological level, man's power to exercise his/her will is increasingly limited. In the world of intellect, as depicted in Qur'anic descriptions of paradise, whatever man wills is immediately present to him. In the *imaginal* world of the *Barzakh*, his position as *fa'āl mā yashā'* is conditioned by refraining from approaching the fruit of a certain tree. Finally, in the material world, he experiences the lowest degree of this capacity. As Tabataba'i states:

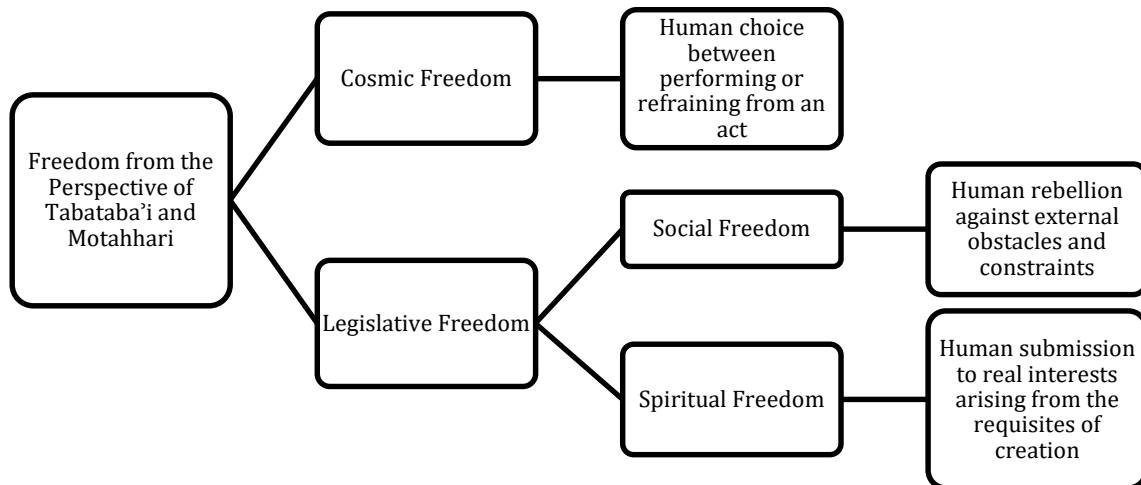
...The very nature and creation that granted man the freedom of will and action is itself what restricts man's will and action, limiting that initial release and primordial freedom. (Tabataba'i 2000, 13)

Morteza Motahhari, by contrast, considers freedom to be one of the essential requisites of human life and perfection, grounded in rebellion and defiance against any obstacle on the path of perfection. At this level, freedom is shared by both animals and humans. Yet, because the human being is a divine vicegerent, he is also responsible and obligated. This responsibility introduces the element of submission and discipline into the very meaning of freedom for man (Motahhari 2021, 65). As Motahhari explains:

... Freedom means rebellion on the one hand, and submission and discipline on the other. Freedom is composed of two elements: insubordination and submission. These two are interdependent: submission is impossible without rebellion, and rebellion is impracticable without reliance on submission. (Motahhari 2021, 66)

Accordingly, freedom for man belongs to the category of philosophical secondary intelligibles. Though it has no external existence, its predication occurs in the mind, while its qualification applies to the concrete human being. This attribution is abstracted from man’s status as God’s vicegerent (Soltani 2020, 121–124). On the basis of Tabataba’i’s thought, freedom is of two principal types—cosmic (*takwīnī*) and legislative (*tashrīfī*) (see Figure 1)—which will be elaborated in what follows.

Figure 1. Freedom from the Perspective of Tabataba’i and Motahhari



3-1. Cosmic Freedom

In fact, the very implication of divine vicegerency is this cosmic freedom. Man is not free simply “to be free”; rather, by virtue of his creation he is compelled to choose, yet by that same creation he is free to choose between performing or refraining from an act, and is not bound to either side. Tabataba’i calls this *cosmic freedom* (Tabataba’i 2000, 86–87).

3-2. Legislative Freedom

Tabataba’i maintains that the cosmos is constituted by truths and realities which have determined the creation of humankind, and these causes and factors encompass man. In other words, the nature of human creation has granted him certain capacities, and he acts within this circle of capacities and not beyond it (Tabataba’i 2000, 88–89). In this sense, since the effect cannot rebel against the cause, submission and discipline are essential components of freedom. According to him, these causes and factors, by reminding man of his needs, lead him to actions that secure the happiness and perfection of the soul (Tabataba’i 2000, 92).

Tabataba’i counts the necessity of social life among these very causes and factors,

which restrict cosmic freedom in two ways: respect for reciprocal rights, and the existence and enforcement of laws that safeguard the public good (Tabataba'i 2000, 93–95). In reality, the subject of legislative freedom is the renunciation of some freedoms in order to preserve others. Motahhari, in turn, examines legislative freedom in two forms: social freedom and spiritual freedom.

3-2-1. Social Freedom

Social freedom means liberation from external constraints and obstacles that reduce human beings to servitude and enslavement of one another; it thus stands opposed to social bondage and limitation (Motahhari 2021, 68). In the context of social life, Tabataba'i, referring to Qur'an 3:79, rejects any form of ownership over another's will, since every human being has been created free (Tabataba'i 2000, 88). Similarly, Motahhari, citing Qur'an 3:64, identifies one of the purposes of the divine prophets as the provision of social freedom for mankind (Motahhari 2021, 69). From Motahhari's perspective, external bondage and exploitation are the outcomes of the innate human impulse for employing the others (*hiss al-istikhdām*). In harmony with modern thought, he considers this kind of bondage blameworthy, and social freedom sacred (Motahhari 2021, 70).

3-2-2. Spiritual Freedom

The necessity of adhering to public and social interests in man's propensity to employ others constitutes the precondition for spiritual freedom. In distinguishing between social and spiritual freedom, Tabataba'i writes:

Man is free with respect to his fellow beings in cases where they demand something from him on the basis of their passions and oppression. Yet with regard to what his essential interests require—particularly those public and social interests to which the aforementioned causes and factors summon him—he is certainly not free. Any call toward the implementation of laws or customs, or toward any practice that accords with human interests, can in no way be considered wrongful coercion or the negation of legitimate freedom. (Tabataba'i 2000, 98–99)

But what is the foundation upon which such social interests and laws are established? For Tabataba'i, the only correct way of resolving the conflicts that arise from man's derivative position as *fa'āl mā yashā'* is through laws grounded in divine unity (*tawhīd*):

The only correct way to resolve conflicts is the way of religion. For this reason, God, the Exalted—who knows human beings better than they know themselves, since He is their Creator—has instituted for them laws and statutes, and has made *tawhīd* their foundation. As a result, His laws reform human beliefs, their morals, and their

actions. In other words, He first makes man understand his true condition: where he has come from, where he is going, and what course he should adopt in this temporary abode in order that it may benefit him in the future. (Tabataba'i 1995, 2: 179–180)

Citing Qur'an 2:213, Tabataba'i further holds that the mission of the prophets was accompanied by the revelation of scripture, by means of which—through the divine law (*Shari'a*)—human disagreements were resolved (Tabataba'i 1995, 2: 180).

In this regard, Motahhari distinguishes between the higher and lower dimensions of man, derived from the composite nature of his existence. Spiritual freedom, for him, means liberation from the bondage of the *debased self* (*khud-i dānī*) (Motahhari 2021, 78–79). From Motahhari's perspective, preserving spiritual freedom is among the foremost aims of the divine prophets (Motahhari 2021, 91).

Taken together, Tabataba'i and Motahhari, in rejecting man's enslavement within society, herald another type of freedom—one that accords with a full understanding of human creation. For them, the mission of the prophets influences human freedom in two essential respects: first, all divine prophets were tasked with freeing human beings from the grasp of domination and enslavement by others; and second, they sought to elevate human freedom toward *tawhīd* and divine piety. For only God—as Creator and Master of all that exists—can resolve the conflicts among human beings. In truth, belief in divine unity abolishes man's mistaken presumption of independence in the position of *fa'āl mā yashā'*. When he realizes his derivative condition, man submits in humility.

Thus, from the perspectives of Tabataba'i and Motahhari, freedom—whether social or spiritual—is inseparable from the philosophy of the mission of the divine prophets. Having clarified the conceptual boundaries of freedom, and in light of the preceding discussion of virtue, it is now time to address the relation between these two notions in their thought.

4. The Relation between Freedom and Virtue

From the perspectives of Tabataba'i and Motahhari, both freedom and virtue belong to the category of philosophical secondary intelligibles, situated at the intersection of knowledge and action. As noted earlier, the explanation of imaginal and intellectual virtue depends on understanding the nature of otherworldly happiness and divine satisfaction, while the realization of social and spiritual freedom likewise depends on full awareness of the causes and factors of the cosmos and the genuine interests that derive from them. In reality, divine satisfaction—which concomitantly brings about

otherworldly happiness—is achieved through submission to the true interests of man. Recognition of these true interests, however, depends on knowing God as the real Creator and Owner of all things. Deviation from this path results in deviation in both freedom and virtue. Tabataba’i and Motahhari agree that knowing God is possible only through understanding the philosophy of the prophetic mission, which is the very essence of religion’s legislation (*tashrī*).

In other words, in measuring the relation between these two concepts it must be said: the subject of virtue is the purification (*tahdhīb*) of the appetitive, irascible, and intellectual faculties in the direction of true happiness; while the subject of freedom is rebellion against the obstacles of opposing faculties and submission to the genuine necessities derived from the causes and factors of the cosmos. True happiness and genuine necessity must be purified from illusion and conjecture, lest man deviate from virtue and freedom in actualizing his active faculties. For this reason, the prophets, through divine legislation, serve as guides to the true happiness and true necessities of human life.

4-1. The Truth of Religion’s Legislation

In various Qur’anic verses, religion is described as that which is “truth” (*ḥaqq*) (Soltani 2020, 203–204). Thus, Qur’an 9:33 states that the aim of sending the Prophet by God was the prevalence of the religion of truth over all other religions. In Qur’an 7:105, in the context of Moses’ mission to Pharaoh, the word *ḥaqq* is used, and the content of his mission is reduced to nothing but the declaration of *ḥaqq*. Similarly, in 5:83–84, the religion brought by the divine prophet, in which the addressees of the verse believe, is described by the word *ḥaqq*. Even in 3:86, the Prophet Muhammad is identified as *ḥaqq* itself, and it is emphasized that those who obstinately oppose *ḥaqq* can never be guided (Tabataba’i 1995, 3: 525). In contrast, Qur’an 18:56 states that the disbelievers employ *bāṭil* (falsehood) in order to contend with *ḥaqq*. Hence 13:1 indicates that the Qur’an itself is *ḥaqq* and, being *ḥaqq*, it functions as the criterion (*furqān*) for distinguishing truth from falsehood.

In various verses, the Qur’an also describes God Himself as *ḥaqq*—meaning that the very source of religion, scripture, and the one who sends the prophets is *ḥaqq* (Soltani 2020, 203). According to Qur’an 24:25, on the Day of Judgment the veils of heedlessness will be removed, and once again *ḥaqq*, which is God Himself, will be manifest in direct presence. Furthermore, in light of the verses culminating in 22:6, God’s power in creating the cosmos is attributed precisely to His being *ḥaqq*. Having thus established *ḥaqq* as the truth of religion’s legislation, it is necessary to examine its semantic dimensions in greater detail.

4-2. The Nature of Truth (*ḥaqq*)

Truth (ḥaqq) means that which is fixed/established, and its opposite is *falsehood (bāṭil)*, which signifies that which is non-established (Tabataba'i 1995, 16: 352). As noted, based on various Qur'anic verses—including 22:6 and 22:62—the source of *ḥaqq* is the divine essence of God, who is utterly free of any non-establishedness or falsehood. It may therefore be said that since the divine essence is devoid of contradiction, no *ḥaqq* stands in conflict with another *ḥaqq*. Because it is established, *ḥaqq* is ascribed both to external reality and to an act in relation to its conformity with its end. For example, the human being, since he exists in the external world, is *ḥaqq*; but if one were to assume that man, as a *possible existence (mumkin al-wujūd)*, had an independent ontological status, this would be false, for the *possible existence* is dependent upon the *necessary existence (wājib al-wujūd)* (Tabataba'i 1995, 11: 458–459). Thus, man attains the quality of *ḥaqq* only by accepting this derivative condition—that is, servitude (*'ubūdiyya*) and divine unity (*tawḥīd*).

According to Tabataba'i, *ḥaqq* is among man's innate (*fiṭrī*) realities and is obligatory to follow; therefore, whoever guides to *ḥaqq* is likewise obligatory to follow (Tabataba'i 1995, 10: 79). In his commentary on Qur'an 24:25, Tabataba'i identifies *ḥaqq* as one of the most self-evident primaries, into which ignorance cannot intrude, though human heedlessness may diminish its reception (Tabataba'i 1995, 11: 136). Moreover, in light of Qur'an 7:8, he affirms that *ḥaqq* is the criterion by which human deeds will be weighed on the Day of Judgment; the more a deed embodies *ḥaqq*, the greater its value and weight (Tabataba'i 1995, 8: 14).

In his commentary on Qur'an 7:89, Tabataba'i explains that what Shu'ayb³ requested from God by the word *fath* (victory) was judgment between two parties—that is, separating them by means of *ḥaqq* (Tabataba'i 1995, 8: 242). Likewise, in Qur'an 7:159 and 7:181, *ḥaqq* is presented as the principle of guidance and judgment, for once *ḥaqq* becomes manifest, *bāṭil* and all non-established realities are exposed and annihilated.

5. Conclusion

The modern world, by privileging freedom and rethinking normative/ethical givens, inaugurated a new order in human life. In this order, the dominant trend, by negating classical virtue as the path to happiness, neglected the social dimension of happiness. Although even within modernity certain intellectual currents have continued to emphasize the moral and social dimensions of freedom and its relation to collective happiness, the possibility of reconciling freedom and virtue in the modern world

remains a necessary topic of reflection.

The aim of this study was to investigate the relation between freedom and virtue in the philosophical and exegetical thought of Tabataba'i and Motahhari. Speaking of the correlation of these two concepts required recourse to the works of these thinkers on each of these notions, through a text-centered interpretive method.

Accordingly, Tabataba'i understands virtue as belonging to the category of philosophical secondary intelligibles, abstracted through syllogism and abstraction. For him, virtues are absolute and realist, meaning that the mental constructs established with respect to virtue and vice are grounded in the realities and cosmic truths, not confined to illusory or conjectural notions derived from the disparate aims of each society. Motahhari regards virtue as gradational, situated at the intersection of knowledge and action; since knowledge itself is gradational in accordance with the degrees of existence, virtues are realized in line with the threefold levels of being. Thus, while Tabataba'i classifies virtue according to its ultimate end, and Motahhari according to its existential gradation, their descriptions ultimately converge. Tabataba'i's framework can be interpreted within Motahhari's schema, such that absolute and realist virtue, in light of the levels of existence, is divided into three general categories: material virtue, which secures worldly aims and social acceptance; imaginal virtue, which—through the guidance of the prophets—secures otherworldly happiness; and intellectual virtue, based on divine love and specific to Islam, which seeks not social or even eschatological ends but God Himself. Hence, a methodological understanding of virtue requires reflection on the philosophy of prophetic mission, for it is through the warnings and glad tidings of the prophets that mankind attains awareness of true happiness and perfection, and with the mission of the Prophet of Islam, the levels of virtue reach their full completion.

Meanwhile, the notion of freedom was also examined from the perspectives of these two thinkers. Freedom, too, belongs to the category of philosophical secondary intelligibles, abstracted from the mode of man's creation. By virtue of the creation narrative, mankind is vested with divine vicegerency. The culmination of this vicegerency is the station of *fa'āl mā yashā'* ("the one who acts as he wills"), which, in man's descent through the levels of existence, becomes constrained according to the conditions of each level. Man's minimal participation in unrestricted will occurs in the material world, the arena of conflicting desires and competing interests. For this reason, submission to the necessities of the material realm and to the common human good is rational. Accordingly, Motahhari defines freedom as consisting of rebellion against obstacles and submission to real necessities: liberation from external

constraints and enslavement by others constitutes social freedom, while submission to man's true interests and necessities constitutes spiritual freedom.

Tabataba'i and Motahhari both see the prophets of God as deliverers, who not only liberated mankind from servitude and tyranny, but, with full knowledge of man's true interests and necessities, ensured his spiritual freedom. Acting in accordance with true happiness and submitting to real necessity are, respectively, the subjects of virtue and freedom. Knowledge of true happiness and true necessity, however, is possible only through understanding the prophetic mission and divine legislation. According to the Qur'an, the essence of this legislation is *ḥaqq*. The word *ḥaqq* applies not only to the religion brought by the prophets, but also to the Qur'an itself, to the Prophet of Islam, and to God. Concerning the nature of *ḥaqq*, it must be noted that, because it is established, it applies both to external reality and to actions in their conformity to their ends. For Tabataba'i, *ḥaqq* is innate to human beings and obligatory to follow, for pure and absolute *ḥaqq* is God Himself, and nothing partakes of *ḥaqq* except by His permission and will. Man, too, acquires *ḥaqq* only by accepting his derivative condition, namely servitude and *tawḥīd*. In fact, *ḥaqq* is abstracted from external reality, and in external reality there is nothing but concrete existence. Since existence derives from God, no *ḥaqq* contradicts another. Thus, *ḥaqq* is the criterion of judgment, and whatever partakes of *ḥaqq* more fully possesses greater value and authenticity. Conversely, whatever is devoid of *ḥaqq*, designated as *bāṭil*, is perishable, since it is non-existent and non-established.

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Notes

1. Philosophical secondary intelligibles, unlike primary intelligibles, are not preceded by sense perception or imagination. They denote abstract concepts whose existence depends on the mind, yet they are predicated of external objects. In contrast, logical secondary intelligibles (al-ma'qūlāt al-thāniya al-manṭiqiyya) are entirely formed and remain within the mind. Although philosophical secondary intelligibles "predication" ('urūd) only in the mind, their qualification (ittiṣāf) refers to external beings. In other words, while such concepts have no independent existence outside the mind, they are nevertheless ascribed to objective reality. For example, when we say "the human being is possible," possibility (imkān) is attributed to the human in external reality (locus of qualification: external), even though possibility itself has no independent external existence and is predicated of the human only in the mind (locus of predication: mental).
2. In Islamic mysticism, the descending arc refers to the process of movement from God toward the world—that is, the descent of existence from the divine source into the lower levels of reality. This concept, often juxtaposed with the ascending arc (*qaws al-ṣu'ūd*), expresses the manifestation and diffusion of the single truth within the multiplicity of created beings.
3. Prophet Shu'ayb (often identified with the biblical Jethro), is regarded in Islam as a messenger sent to

the people of Midian (Madyan) and the dwellers of al-Aykah (the wooded tract).