

Man and the Formation of Social Life According to Tafsir Al-Mizan

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Abstract

Man is like the rest of the creatures of the world; the difference lies in his possession of intellect and thought while other creatures lack these abilities. In addition, his social living and his formation of society are primary elements in his life. However, man has not shifted from individual life to the social life; he has an intrinsic tendency to live socially.

What made man live a social life and interact with others is to meet the natural needs of his daily life and to benefit from the intellectual achievements and endeavours of others to live better and grow both materially and spiritually.

The natural needs and the endeavours made to attain them are considered as the main sources of the formation of human society. This article investigates the viewpoint of Allamah Tabatabai on the characteristics of man, particularly his social life, the origin of the human society, and man's tendency to establish social justice.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout history, people have explored many issues, pondered on them, and reached useful and influential conclusions. Not only has the natural environment belonged to this innovative thinking as well as this precise and intelligent contemplation, but people have also paid attention to metaphysics and the intangible world that is secure from sensory experience.

By doing so, people have provided themselves and others the precious asset of knowledge and

cognition. In addition, they have not neglected themselves, their relation with society, kinship, lifestyle, and administration of justice in group relations.

Knowledge of man and his lifestyle, his interactions with others, his relation with the natural environment, the interplay between him and them, and his relation with God and the universe has been studied not only by philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists, but has also been focused on by the divine religions, particularly Islam and its divine book, the Qur'an. Qur'anic commentators paid special attention to research on human nature and man's social and moral life:

Knowing the nature of man which is comprised of both body and soul, knowing immateriality, and the way it is related to material body, being aware of the true perfection of man and how to achieve and guide men into it are all among the issues included in the knowledge about man (theological anthropology). The best way to learn about these issues and principles is to make use of the word of the Qur'an because it has been sent for guiding and perfecting man and has explicitly elaborated on the above-mentioned issues.[2](#)

In fact, the Qur'an takes all aspects of man's life into consideration and illuminates all matters:

"We have sent down to you the Book explaining everything clearly, a Guide, Mercy, and Glad Tidings" (Nahl, 16:89).

From the aforesaid verse and other Qur'anic verses, the ultimate objective of the revelation of the Qur'an is to guide man and save him from the darkness of ignorance:

"[This is] a Book which We have revealed to you that you may bring forth men from utter darkness into light" (Ibrahim, 14:1).

In Al-Mizan and his other writings, Allamah Tabatabai pondered on anthropology from a new perspective that was distinct from that of others; he opened up a new horizon in this regard and recognized and revealed unknown aspects of man's nature.

Man and the stages of his life

A person lives and grows while adhering to specific rules and principles for guidance and seeks to employ all his abilities and faculties to bring prosperity so that he can both enjoy worldly blessings and make provisions for his hereafter. This worldly life has a beginning and an end; that is, it is an intermediate stage between two lives, one before and one after it.

Therefore, beyond this worldly life, man will live either a happy or wretched life, which will itself have some primary or secondary aspects that are considered tools in his life. When all worldly causes fail to function and the veil is lifted, man will be aware of that life. In addition, man had another life before this worldly life, and each of the three lives is modelled according to the previous one.

In other words, the third life is dependent on the second life, and the second one on the first. Thus, people are placed between two lives.³

The evidence of the first life is the verse that refers to the world of Dharr (i.e., that before this material world) and the covenant between man and God:

"And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes We bear witness" (A'raf, 7: 172).

This verse implies that "before man comes to this world, God created him to give some covenants, and clearly man had a kind of life before this worldly life,"⁴ There are many verses indicating that the life after this worldly life is dependent on the latter; for example,

"Do not urge excuses today; you shall be requited only for what you did" (Tahrim, 66:7).

"Then every soul shall be paid what it earned (Baqarah, 2:281).

"On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done of good and what it has done of evil" (Ale-Imran, 3:30).

Hence, man has a three-stage life; the worldly life, the life before it, and the life after it. Each stage has its own specific rules; however, there is some link, harmony, and interplay between all stages that shape the entirety of a person's life.

Two deaths and two lives ahead of man

Man's essence includes stages that should be passed to eventually achieve perfection, since man's being moves from imperfection to perfection, and undergoes continuous and gradual change. He moves through each stage until it reaches the final stage of perfection. He died before entering this world, and then was revived by God. Likewise, he is again changed by God's taking away his life and giving it back to him:

"You were without life, and He gave you life; then will He cause you to die, and will again bring you to life; and again to Him will you return" (Baqarah, 2:28).

This verse refers to the true essence of man, what God endowed him with, the value of his perfection, the vastness of his nature, the stages he passes during his life, namely the worldly life, death, the life in Barzakh (i.e., the Purgatory), the life in the hereafter, and finally, his return to God.

Therefore, man faces two lives and two deaths: the two lives take place in this world and in Barzakh, and the two deaths occur in exiting this world and upon entering the hereafter, as stated in the Qur'an,

"They will say: 'Our Lord You have made us subject to death twice, and You have given us life twice' (Mu'min, 23: 11).

The first subjection to death occurs after this worldly life, and the first restoration to life happens after death in Barzakh. Similarly, the second subjection to death and resurrection happens in Barzakh and on the Day of Judgment respectively.⁵

Allamah Tabatabai maintained that the verse "You have made us subject to death twice, and You have given us life twice" refers to the taking away of life on the last day of the worldly life and giving life in Barzakh, then taking away life in Barzakh and resurrecting on the Day of Judgment for reckoning.

Thus, the above verse gives reference to taking away life and resurrecting twice; that is, taking away life after the lives in both this world and Barzakh and resurrecting in both Barzakh and on the Day of Judgment. If there was no life in Barzakh, the second reference to taking away life would be incorrect, since taking away life happens after living and restoring life after death. Both life and death depend on their previous state; otherwise, taking away life and bringing back to life are not meaningful.⁶

Based on this discussion, Allamah Tabatabai proved the existence of Barzakh, although its explanation is beyond the constraints of this article.

Man's vast scope of action

Man is a creature who possesses the ability to think so as to know the world and other things around him, eventually establishing a relationship with them to pave the way for his perfection. Through his voluntary actions that depend on his thinking and willpower, a person proceeds towards perfection through his ability to think. Therefore, man inevitably must have practical and theoretical rules and confirmations regarding any good that is directly or indirectly related to his perfection.

These rules and confirmations consist in the very general and comprehensive interests by which man justifies and defines his individual and social actions; or before he takes such actions, he first measures them against these interests, and then he achieves the interests by materializing the actions.

In other words, man has been created in a way that he is related with other earthly and heavenly creatures. Likewise, other natural things have been created in a way that they are connected with and influence each other, hence, perpetuating their existence. However, a person's influence on other creatures and things is greater. That is, in addition to be connected to other natural things, man manipulates them simply and ordinarily to achieve his simple and natural aims.

However, as he is equipped with intellect and understanding, his manipulation can be sophisticated, surprising, and wonderful; other creatures and things are unable to manipulate him this way. It is man who analyzes other things and innovates by mixing some natural things to the extent that nothing is immune from his manipulation. Sometimes he makes for himself things that nature is unable to create;

he does the task of nature, and sometimes fights it in order to hinder its task.

Man makes use of everything to achieve his goals. The passage of time and history of man also confirm the scope of his manipulation and increasingly profound theories. The Qur'an supports this claim:

"And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth" (Jathiyah, 45: 13).

The relationship between man's knowledge and action

If human beings as such are studied without taking individual, biological, and environmental factors into account, it can be concluded that every human being in his life has some thoughts and ideas that he makes use of as tools. These thoughts and ideas are so numerous and extensive that they cannot be counted; its large quantity and variety amazes the intellect. What creates them, splits them into branches, and links them to each other is either man's five exoteric and esoteric senses, or his manipulation by means of his thinking ability.

If man's thoughts, knowledge, understanding, and actions are explored more profoundly, it will become clear that not all of them are equal. Some merely refer to external creatures and things and do not cause or lead to man's willpower and action; rather, they are the products of chemical reactions in man's brain.

In other words, when external creatures and things are exposed to our senses, the senses are acted upon, and as a result, we understand that, for example, water flows, pomegranate is a fruit, and land is different from water.

Similar is the knowledge gained by observing one's self and its presence or the knowledge gained through perceiving generalities. Such knowledge and perceptions cause neither willpower nor action in man; they only refer to external creatures and things.

Unlike the above category, some of man's thoughts and ideas are perceptions and understanding that are dealt with only when they influence actions or are means of achieving perfections and merits in life.

For example, some actions are good and praiseworthy, while others are bad and blameworthy; justice is good, and oppression and injustice are evil; so are concepts like leadership and ownership as opposed to being subordinate and possessed.

In contrast to the first kind of thoughts and perceptions, the second kind does not refer to the objective and external creatures and entities that are separate from man and his understanding. Similarly, they are not created by the effects of the external causes on us; rather, they are perceptions man provides himself with through his esoteric senses. In addition, these perceptions are outcomes of two requirements of man's esoteric faculties that enable him to carry out an action or prevent him from doing so.

All moves or changes that occur in his lifetime through either external things or materials inside him are either useful or harmful to his existence, either rendering it "orderly" or lead it to disorder, are either compatible with the natural effort of this way of being or not, and in a nutshell, are either agreeable to his nature or opposed to it.

Man's nature requires him to accept some moves or changes and reject some others; some delight him and others do not; he seeks some and fears others. These two requirements create emotions such as love, hatred, and eagerness in man, and these very emotions cause him to develop an understanding of the meaning of good and evil, the praiseworthy and blameworthy, the mandatory and permissible.

Then he makes these perceptions mediate between him and objective and external things and creatures; consequently, he takes an action or avoids it to achieve his purpose of living. This way, the relationship between knowledge and action materializes.

Allamah Tabatabai maintained that God imbues man with this knowledge and perception to equip him to take action so as to manipulate the world, and consequently what God wants is fulfilled.[7](#)

However, this practical inspiration or guidance is of two kinds. One kind of guidance is directed to all creatures; that is, it directs every creature to its specific perfection, and guides it toward its particular actions so that it can protect itself and its offspring can survive:

"He Who gave to everything its creation, then guided it" (Taha, 20:60).

The second kind of guidance is specific to mankind. On the basis of this guidance, every man instinctively knows which actions are good and should be taken, and which actions are bad and should be avoided:

"And the soul and Him Who made it perfect, Then [He] inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it," (Shams, 91:7-8).

This intrinsic inspiration existing in man since his birth, is revealed in the form of a moral sense. This sense then is actualized as he grows. According to the above-mentioned verse and some others, human beings generally enjoy a shared moral sense and are aware of moral principles.

This knowledge or awareness is not acquired from external teachings and factors; it has been obtained from divine inspiration that exists in man's nature. Of course, understanding these moral issues may be the task of human intellect, and not conscience.

That is, just as man can gain knowledge of theoretical issues through his intellect, by using it he can develop knowledge of the moral principles in some stages of its development. Therefore, obtaining such perceptions is indispensable to man's inward structure and is an innate issue not specific to only some men; rather, it can be found in all human beings:

"We revealed to them the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of Zakat, and Us [alone] did they worship" (Anbiya, 21:73).

Allamah Tabatabai contended that "We revealed" in the above verse does not mean revelation and legislative guidance. Instead, it means esoterically and generatively (Takwini) inspiring and leading man to perform good deeds. In some men, due to their greater capabilities, the esoteric guidance and divine endorsement are actualized more strongly, but they are revealed to a smaller degree in less capable people.[8](#)

However, although all men enjoy the same nature, their behavioral and personality differences cannot be denied. So what is the source of these differences? "People's behavioral differences are caused by their personality as it was shaped by various individual and social factors, and not by essential differences."[9](#)

Necessity: the factor that forms social life

Man has a faculty (Quwwah) called the perceptive thought by which he develops a relationship among events, things, and creatures in the present, what happened in the past, and what will occur in the future. Hence, due to this perceptive thought, he has knowledge of events to some extent.

In addition, God has granted man the ability to connect with and make use of all things in the world, whether it is through connecting with a thing or by considering it a tool for using something else. Consequently, he has developed many sciences and technologies, and opened up new horizons through his thinking ability.[10](#)

As a result of these two divine blessings, that is, the ability to think and manipulate, man can employ the world's creatures to protect himself and survive. He began with nonliving beings and then made other specific tools for manipulating plants and animals. However, he did not stop there. He began to employ other men and benefitted from their property and work.

No doubt man is a civil and social being. He wants everything for himself, and he uses the power of nature and all the means and elements for his benefit; he makes use of plants to meet his daily needs and employs them as a tool to reach his long-term goals; he also uses, trains, and employs all kinds of animals to achieve his fundamental aims. He applies the instinct of employing all creatures to other human beings, too. Thus, man seeks to employ other creatures and has selected society to perfect this employment.

Here, the cooperative society and social life are formed; man gives in to the cooperative society and social life since he discovers that through his own endeavor and without using others' efforts, he cannot provide for himself. On the other hand, he cannot use others' efforts without giving anything in return, because they are also people who expect the same from him. Inevitably, he chose the cooperative society and social life as the best tool, and has given in to social life to survive. As a result, necessity

has led to the formation of the cooperative society and social life. [11](#)

This view is in sharp contrast with Aristotle's view. Aristotle considered man a creature for which social life is natural, and which innately seeks to build society. "By nature, man is a social animal, and the being which is innately and not accidentally without homeland is either inferior or superior to man. He resembles the man who was rebuked by Homer, who said about him, "He does not belong to any tribe and is lawless and homeless." [12](#)

Allamah's view is to some extent similar to the viewpoint of Hobbes', a renowned English philosopher of the 17th century and the author of the well-known book, Leviathan. According to Hobbes, what led to the formation of human society is necessity which ultimately resulted in a kind of implicit social contract.

Necessity: a factor in social justice

As the process of man's social life continued this way, he detected a grave problem: every human being expects from others what they expect from him. In other words, just as he tried to exploit others' efforts, they equally tried to exploit his. In this stage, man decided to form a civil and social life based on cooperation.

After the formation of social life, he discovered that the stability and survival of society and social life were contingent on the balanced nature of human interrelationships so that everybody can restore his rights. This is social justice.

According to Allamah, this discovery implies that man's civil society and social justice is a decision that he was compelled to accept due to necessity, because if it were not for necessity, no man would agree to limit his volition and freedom. This is the meaning of the well-known saying: 'By nature man is civil' and the meaning of Allamah's quote:

"Social justice is man's verdict, and in a word, in both issues, necessity enabled him to accept civilization and social life, and consequently, social justice. If social justice were the basic requirement of man's nature, social justice would be prevalent in social affairs, and collaboration and equality would prevail in most societies in the best possible way. However, we witness that this is not the case. Powerful people impose their desires on the weak, and the victorious enslave the defeated abjectly to achieve their objectives." [13](#)

Allamah inferred this view from the following verses:

"Surely he is unjust, ignorant" (Ahzab, 33:72).

"Surely man is created of a hasty temperament" (Ma'arij, 70:19).

"Surely man is very unjust, very ungrateful" (Ibrahim, 14:34).

"Surely man transgresses, in that he looks upon himself as self-sufficient" (Alaq, 96:6-7).

Man and social life

Man's nature requires him to have a social life because not only does necessity entail this but history has also portrayed people as social beings. Allamah asserted, "From the very beginning, man formed society out of necessity so that he could have a social life and a high status in society because of which everybody would associate with him, and he with others; he would also benefit from others' good, and they from his." [14](#)

Many verses in the Qur'an introduce man as a living being who should inevitably live socially to survive:

"O you men Surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other" (Hujurat, 49: 13).

On the basis of knowing each other, the system of man's social and cooperative life stabilizes and becomes perfect. In other words, man's needs in this worldly life are so much that people are incapable of meeting those needs alone. Hence, a) some people employ others and benefit from them, b) they base their lives on cooperation and collaboration, and c) members of society learn that they can exchange their possessions with others.

The requirement of this type of life is that everybody makes efforts in their area of expertise to do it best. From the results of his work, he keeps what he needs, and naturally its surplus is needed by others because they are involved in another job. He also needs their products and exchanges the excess of these products with his wants.

This is because people need the excess of others' products, and they present their products to others. Of course, this is done differently due to difference in people's needs for products and in their efforts to attain them. These needs, as well as the process of meeting them, rendered people eager to have a social and collaborative life, and made increasing efforts to improve it so that it can be materialized perfectly.

Aristotle also considered man a social and political being. What can link Hobbes's view with that of Aristotle is his idea that if man is pulled out of the politico-civil life that makes him adhere to morality, he will become the most vicious and ferocious creature.

According to Hobbes, "An individual cannot survive independently, so nature has formed a political organization in which there is division of labour and successively division of classes. As Aristotle in Politics said, 'Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.'" [15](#)

The gradual evolution of man's social life

Society has not been created perfectly from the beginning; rather, like man's other mental and spiritual affairs, the process of his becoming social was completed in stages. The more material and spiritual merits he enjoyed, the more organized his society and social life became.

The first society that emerged was the family through marriage because it had a natural reason that urged man to have a family. However, what is important is that man has not chosen social life out of the process of individual life and has not considered its advantages in detail to select it since there exists no period in history that shows man to have lived individually; instead, natural factors urged him to marry and form a social life.

Nevertheless, according to the Qur'anic view, "The first time man discovered the advantages of society, consciously understood its merits in detail, and sought to protect its interests was when the first prophet was raised among the people to guide them. To sum up, he noticed the merits and advantages of social life, thanks to prophethood," [16](#)

In this regard, Allah said in the Holy Qur'an,

"People were a single nation; so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth, that it might judge among people in that in which they differed" (Baqarah, 2:213).

Conclusion

- Man's life has three stages: the life before this world, the worldly life, and the life after this world. Every stage depends on the previous one.
- Man experiences two lives and two deaths. One death occurs on the last day of man's life in this world while the other occurs in Barzakh. The first life means resurrection in Barzakh; the second one is on the Day of Judgment for reckoning.
- Man is connected to other creatures and both influences and is influenced by them. However, the scope of his effect as a being having intellect and understanding is more profound because he can manipulate other creatures through his intellect and understanding, while other creatures do not have the same ability.
- Man enjoys two kinds of thought. What caused them are either exoteric and esoteric senses, or his manipulation of other things through his intellect. The first kind is the perceptions causing neither willpower nor action in man; rather, they are of external creatures and thoughts. The second kind is perceptions that do not explain external creatures and thoughts; instead, men obtain them by being inspired by esoteric to make use of these perceptions in action. According to Allamah Tabatabai, God

imbued man with such perceptions to help him prepare for life.

- Man is a social being, and as he cannot meet all his needs alone, he inevitably has given in to the social life to survive. That is, necessity and need led to the formation of social and cooperative life.
- Social justice has its roots in satisfying the needs of social life because after forming the social life, he discovered that the durability and survival of social life was contingent upon balanced human interrelationships so that everybody could restore his rights. Inevitably, for social life to survive, man should accept that all social facilities are distributed equally.
- Man's social life has proceeded gradually and has perfected itself throughout history.

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2. (Jawadi Amuli, 29)

3. (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. I, p. 94).

4. (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. I, p. 94).

5. (Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, I/113-114).

6. (Ibid, 314/17).

7. (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. 2, pp. 115 & 116).

8. (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. 14, pp. 306 & 307).

9. (The Office of Cooperation between Hawzah and University, 96)

10. (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. 2, p. 115).

- [11.](#) (Allamah Tabatabai, The Collection of Treatises, pp. 28–31)
 - [12.](#) (Aristotle, Politics, p. 5).
 - [13.](#) (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vol. 2, pp. 118 & 119)
 - [14.](#) (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, 18/328).
 - [15.](#) (Trigg, 34)
 - [16.](#) (Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan, vo. 4/ p. 96).
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