

Introduction

All humans in this world are temporal beings whose lives have a beginning and end. Their past reaches oblivion and so does their future. The span between the beginning and end, which is the repository of one's life, is surrounded by nihility. We experience life and existence but we have not experienced oblivion and never shall.

Our experiences are restricted to our existence. Thus, we learn from experience that, “No human life is permanent and it has a finish just as it has a start”. Even though we have not reached the end of our lives (i.e. death), we realize from the deaths of our fellow humans that there is no escape from this unavoidable juncture. The two points of start and finish draw our attention; two disparate and sensitive phases or rather—two extremities.

People see their inception as a transferal from inexistence to existence and the opposite point as a transferal from existence to inexistence. However, in becoming existent, we traverse an eternally long path—what distance is longer than the gap between nullity and reality?

This apparently impassable distance brings up various questions. Such as, how is our genesis possible? Where have we come from? Who is our originator? We cannot find the efficient cause for our existence and continuity either in ourselves or in the beings around us. The intellect drives us to seek the entity that has invited us into existence—an entity to which the whole world is indebted for their existence; an entity who is sufficient of all others and who is untainted by any restrictions and conditions.

Endeavoring to understand and contemplate our end makes the question of our origination more sensitive and important, and it suffuses every moment of our lives. The Master of the World has made all beings in existence His guests; He maintains this feast, and has made humans exempt from facing oblivion. This end has confronted us with oblivion and the span between existence and inexistence. It has made us aware that not only are we needy in our genesis, we are also needy in our continuation. We humans believe that the gap between existence and nonexistence is miniscule. However, coming into existence out of the void is a miracle that has removed humanity's genesis from the restrictions of nature.

On the other hand, the eventide of our existence, as opposed to our dawning, is a terrifying and macabre juncture. We humans live and relish our lives and existences. We have tasted of the exotic drink of existence and thus, all our endeavors are based on preserving it. We guard our existence against anything that will bring about our ends. Our aspiration is to eradicate exterminative factors and their symptoms (such as weakness and frailty). We dream of finding the elixir of life. We aim at the ideal of freedom from the constricted and impenetrable prison of time. We wish that our past and future sorrows would not hurt us. We abhor this final juncture, thus, we ask ourselves:

Is there a way to cheat death? Will I continue to exist after death? Moreover, if I am not obliterated after death, where shall I be and where shall I go from there?

These questions confront the human identity. Hence, thoughtful people cannot disregard such questions and cannot delude themselves into believing that they are exaggerated. This essential quality has released these questions from historic and geographic boundaries. Archeological and anthropological studies have attested to the fact that understanding our beginning and end has always been a universal issue. For instance, the relics of ancient graves and primitive customs regarding the method of interment of the dead are telltales of their particular beliefs about life after death and the state of the dead.¹ Modern humans also seek answers to these questions in both their personal lives and scientific and philosophic studies.

Whenever a question agitates the sea of our intellect, our mind's ambition is to reach the truth even though in this context the obscure truth of creation is not easily discerned. The deeper a question penetrates into the profundity of existence, the harder it is to determine its answer. Existence is profound, complex, involute, exquisite, and tenacious. Thus, even discovering all facets of its most apparent layer has no end. We must have perceptive eyes and acute ears and think straight. All fantasies regarding existence will be repelled some day. Even though it may be hard, we must understand the language of existence. The world is not mute. It speaks and does not allow any utterance to be forced upon it.

Due to various mental-spiritual reasons, in order to answer their complex questions, many people seek refuge in delusive thoughts and fabricate beliefs by fantasizing and making groundless suppositions. Sometimes these superstitious beliefs turn into incontrovertible and dogmatic beliefs in future generations due to the predominance of followership mentalities. Thus, these beliefs dominate the minds and souls of a people for centuries. Doubtless, many weak and superstitious beliefs about death and the afterlife are thus originated.

In Quest for an Answer

Two repositories of knowledge open the path for human understanding:

1. The Results of Scientific Research and Investigation

In modern day, we divide this repository into science and philosophy. Science comprises empirical knowledge or knowledge based on inductive syllogism and philosophy comprises non-empirical knowledge or knowledge based on intellective syllogism. The common attribute of these two divisions is that the scientist or philosopher endeavors to arrange and prove a hypothesis according to logical principles. Whether its accordance with actuality is proven or its fallaciousness is revealed, both have a great part in human knowledge. The caravan of human knowledge has traversed many treacherous and unpredictable paths in order to reach its contemporary state while accelerating every moment. However, our lack of knowledge is indubitably incomparable with our knowledge.

Obviously, in order to attain stable and trustworthy knowledge regarding life after death, we cannot utilize empirical knowledge. Even if science can successfully present a natural explanation of life and death, it cannot reveal knowledge of the state of death and the dead. This is because, empirical knowledge relates to perceptible and repeatable phenomena and it is mute regarding other phenomena. Those who have gone are silent and those extant are unaware of these tidings.

Various thinkers have attempted to answer questions regarding our finale using their intellectual findings and rational contemplation of humanity and the cosmos. Varieties of philosophical schools have presented diverse theories on this issue. However, these theories are typically general and can at most prove the continuation of individuals. The intellect cannot depict postmortal spiritual incidents or even the experience of death. In order to advance in this field the intellect has fixed its eyes upon a different source. This source must present the intellect with conceptual and factual intuitional elements so it can begin its progress in this field.

2. Revelation

Revelation is knowledge that has been given to humanity freely and that is not a result of human toil. Thus, it does not have the limitations and flaws of human knowledge. This cascading fount of knowledge has set forth the main lines for all exterior and interior discoveries regarding existence and has presented a solid image of the whole truth or, in other words, the big picture. Without this knowledge, humans can neither truly understand their current state nor their continued existence. Divine prophets and messengers have bestowed this vital knowledge upon humanity. They are the first to whisper the song of eternity in our ears. They have reminded us that the thirst for everlastingness is a true thirst and can only be quenched with the elixir of eternal life.

The prophets have illustrated our beginning and end, and our fall and ascension. They have engraved absolute perpetuity and immortality in our minds. Knowledge of our origin and destination is an element of guidance that may only be found in the teachings of divine prophets. The result of this knowledge is true self-awareness; it is never falling astray in the world; it is precise awareness of one's path and destination. Prophets are experienced voyagers who warn travelers of the dangers and deviations of the

path and guide them to the depths of existence. We humans may learn endless knowledge and wisdom from the prophets. With the aid of these immaculate souls, we may purify all aspects of our existence and attain perfection.

In exchange for these blessings, all they ask for is faith. The messengers of God (‘a) bestow something upon humans that they can never attain on their own and all they ask for in return is what logically entails from their enjoinder. Faith [إيمان] is a process in which all human systems—such as the system of knowledge or emotions—participate. Faith in our origin is faith in prophethood, and faith in our destination is faith in returning to our origin. Faith in the Prophet (S) is faith in God and faith in God and the prophet is faith in life in the Hereafter.

Denying the Resurrection and life after death is denying our origin, both of which are denying prophethood. By disseminating divine messages, the prophets show us our true station and shed us of the stain of negligence towards God and ourselves. By aiding our intellect, they purify our worldly lives. They increase our passion for righteousness and free us of despair, fear, and anxiety; thus, they swiftly guide us to the harbor of tranquility.

They present us with the past and future of existence and from within nature, they make us a guest of the supernatural. These experienced voyagers reveal the essence of natural phenomena through their divine identities. In other words, prophets tear the veils between nature and the extramundane. Thus, the paths between the heavens and earth are opened and earthly humans can perceive the supernatural just as they see nature.

The teachers of logic and certitude and the deniers of blind advocacy present their enjoinder such that it leaves no intellectual justification for doubt or refutation, unless mental states or psychological conditions interfere to simulate inner doubt.

Revelation has specific attributes that differentiate it from the first source of knowledge (human knowledge):

Freedom from all errors and faults

Benefiting from the divine fountainhead of absolute knowledge and the prophets’ needlessness of methods of knowledge acquisition that have the possibility of fault

Dependency of these teachings upon objective scientific arguments

The Noble Qur’an and the compendium of the teachings of the Prophet (S) and the Immaculate Imams (‘a) have provided us with a valuable treasury of truths regarding death and life in the Hereafter. Researchers must have the same attitude towards revelational and religious statements as they have

towards all other aspects of existence. These descriptive revelational statements explain reality and accurately report the past, present, and future of existence. Thus, any researcher who knows the laws of apprehending and discovering truths can theorize regarding religious statements, including statements about death and immortality, and attempt to prove their theories. Interpretation and elucidation of religious propositions and concepts is a scientific endeavor. In scientific research, we must prevent influence of personal and psychological conditions that separate us from the path of truth. This is not easy, but it is possible. We must not forget that we humans are subject to errors and the probability of these errors is high. However, we must not let this discourage us; rather, we must increase our resolve and precision. Therefore, even though this second source is complete and infallible, our scientific knowledge is progressive (not absolute) and sometimes erroneous. Our cognitive system acknowledges its limitations; however, it does not tolerate a standstill.

Reliance upon revelation does not mean that the intellect is faulty and must be put aside; rather, correct understanding of revelational concepts requires reason. We mean to say that without the aid of revelation and by utilizing only reason, one cannot fathom life in the Hereafter. Even with the guidance of religion, reason cannot answer all its questions at once. Thus, many illuminated philosophers—while they have been successful in philosophical research about various issues regarding death and life in the Hereafter—have found themselves at an impasse regarding other philosophic issues on this subject. As a result, they have sufficed themselves with faith in the concepts and teachings in the Qur'an and Hadith² or have organized their philosophic theories with inspiration from divine revelation.³ It must be reminded that the path of discovery of truth, like all human affairs, is progressive.

عقل، چون جبریل گوید احمدا

گر یکی گامی نهم سوزد مرا

تو مرا بگذار زین پس پیشران

حدّ من این بود ای سلطان جان

As Gabriel says O Ahmad, reason;

Burns me if I (revelation) take a step.

Hence, set me as the navigator;

This is my station O leader of hearts (reason). [4](#)

Since death and life in the Hereafter deal with human states, understanding humans and humanity has a direct effect in eschatological discussions. To state the matter differently, we must first harmonize our opinions on immortality with our views regarding the nature of humankind. Therefore, anthropology is an important prerequisite of eschatology. Accordingly, it is befitting that we first take a glance at several important anthropological principles that have a close link with immortality. Then, we shall commence the discussion on death and eternity.

- [1.](#) – In their findings from primitive peoples, researchers have encountered issues that reveal various types of beliefs in life after death; regardless of whether these beliefs are superstitious or not. For example, they state that primitive humans have devised plans in order to ease the transportation of the dead that have various forms all over the world. For instance, they would cover the dead with heaps of stones, or they would tie their dead with strong ropes. In some places, they would even impale their dead into the ground with sharp poles through their chests. Moreover, mummifying the dead; placing pictures, icons, and food in graves; burying the friends and family of the deceased in its grave; etc. were various ancient customs that reveal early humans beliefs. For more information, see: Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 1, pp. 49, 155, 180, 283, 429, 851, 925; vol. 2, p. 18; vol. 3, p. 9; and Nass, John B., *The Comprehensive History of Religions*.
- [2.](#) – Ibn-e Sīnā (Avicenna), *Ilāhiyāt-e Shifā'* (Healing, Theology), disquisition 9, chap. 7.
- [3.](#) – Mullāṣadr, *Asfār* (Journeys), vol. 9, p. 179.
- [4.](#) – Jalāl ad-Dīn Maṭṭavī, *Mathnavī-e Ma'navī* (Spiritual Couplets), Book I, verses 1069–1070.

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