

## Searching for the Meaning of Life in Avicenna's and Ibn Arabi's Systems of Thought Regarding Death and the Hereafter

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### Abstract

The two issues, death and the hereafter, play an irrefutable role in explaining the meaning of life. While using a comparative analytic method to analyze Avicenna's and Ibn Arabi's points of view in this regard, this paper explores points of view supporting and opposing their statements. To both of them, mankind's this-worldly life, without belief in the hereafter and immortality, and without achievement of eternal salvation, does not possess a reasonable goal, a considerable value, and a defensible function. Although both of them agree on issues such as an optimistic attitude towards death, the absolute dependence of the hereafter on the this-worldly life, belief in both the physical and spiritual aspects of the hereafter, but apart from the fact that Avicenna explores these issues through his rational method, and Ibn Arabi through combining the two methods: intuition and referring to the Qur'anic verses and the traditions, these two thinkers have two different views on other issues, such as their perception of the physical hereafter, the explanation of the proportion between mankind's two existential essences, the topic of eternity, and dealing with the issue of fear of death. The importance of addressing this issue arises from the fact that as the issue of the meaning of life, like an ever-lasting stream full of adventure, has approached the recent centuries that feature industrial and technological development and increased social welfare and bio-facilities, it has become more highlighted and controversial for multiple reasons. In the meantime, what has made this issue face a more serious challenge is the issue of death and the quality of the

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hereafter. The emergence of atheistic schools, such as: Marxism and materialism, which have introduced death as the end of human life, and which have considered the hereafter as an unreasonable and unjustifiable issue, has made mankind face the following serious question: “If this is the case, will this short life with a great deal of all kinds of hardships and pain worth living?”, “Does our existence basically lead to a strategy other than what we see and hear?”, and “Is it possible to imagine any functions for life other than satisfying the lusts and animal instincts?” This way, death finds its own place in the course of human life. Avicenna and Ibn Arabi have made efforts to remove the ambiguity of this mysterious fact as far as possible through reason and thought, and have shed light on the dark angles of this perpetual concern of human beings, so that both; life can find meaning in the light of the reality of death, and death can become a desirable thing in transitions through life. Avicenna defines death as follows: “Death is nothing but the separation of the immaterial spirit from its material attachments. Death is like a blacksmith's tools and equipment when he leaves those tools and equipment. Avicenna’s attention to death, as the final point of mankind’s this-worldly life, stems from his attention to the fact that the misunderstanding and misrepresenting of death can greatly harm the attitude that “life is meaningful”. His research into death begins by exploring how the soul emerges and explaining the relationship between the soul and the body in mankind’s this-worldly life. In the *Soul* section of *The Book of Healing*, he emphasizes the creation of the soul by denying its existence prior to the existence of the body, and recognizes the creation of the soul to be simultaneous with that of the body, albeit he regards the body as a tool for the soul as well as its realm. According to Avicenna, fear of death is the greatest fear that seizes humans.

The main cause of this fear is mankind’s ignorance, and Avicenna’s solution is paying attention to the fact that while leaving the body, the spirit continues its life in an intact manner by cutting its bodily attachments, thus achieving its true salvation. According to Avicenna, the necessity of a meaningful life (at least in its purposeful perception) is belief in the existence of the hereafter, which is subordinate to the acceptance of the independence of the soul. But in his definition of death and life, Ibn Arabi considers ignorance equal to death in the sense of nonexistence and annihilation, whereas most people consider benefiting from wealth and position as a sign of life. But death, in the sense of alertness and wakefulness, is what he calls a "Gate towards God", in case of whose absence, nobody and no nations will succeed in their desires and goals. Therefore, his advice to anybody who aspires for a meaningful life is that he or she mortify his or her own senses and their achievements, and listen to his or her own inner call, which is full of divine inspirations. This way, a human achieves the ultimate meaning of life. On the other hand, he regards death as a separation wall between the beloved and the human, who is very eager to overwhelm this obstacle and pass through it to visit their beloved as soon as possible. But since this is out of their power and authority, they have to be patient and disappointedly wait until the period of this "blessing"; i.e. life, ends, and the obstacle is removed. Although Ibn Arabi regards death as the separation of the soul from the material body, which has brought its sensory life, elsewhere, he avoids using the word death, and is more willing to call it “glad tidings about reunion”. But by emphasizing the inability of

reason in all areas related to the hereafter, and relying on intuition from his heart and narrative sources, Ibn Arabi regards the physical hereafter as being decisive and essential, and considers belief in the mere spiritual hereafter as being due to ignorance of existential essences. In this regard, he says: “This group has been ignorant of the fact that there are two essences: the essence of bodies and the essence of spirits. They have tried to prove the latter, and have neglected the former. But we take both of them into consideration.” Accordingly, he considers both the physical and spiritual aspects for the hereafter, except that he has his own interpretation of the physical hereafter. “When God takes mankind to himself, he gives them a body, but not this earthly body, but rather something deserving the domain to which they have been transferred. That place is home of eternity and a house for eternal life, which is consistent with a moderate existence, leading neither to death nor to the disintegration of parts. Since the misrepresenting of the hereafter can disrupt the meaningfulness of life, Ibn Arabi tries, in the light of the holy Qur’anic verses, to depict a realistic image of the truth of the hereafter and mankind’s status and life in it. In this regard, since both absolute disappointment and false and illusory hope act like bandits on this path, he mixes the hereafter with a kind of fear and hope. If the main benefit of the topic of meaningfulness is to find the spirit of hopefulness towards life, and to be free from suffering from purposeless and absurdism, exploring Ibn Arabi’s works and paying attention to his special attitude toward the meaningfulness of life, in the light of belief in death and the hereafter, can be an appropriate way to achieve this goal. Considering the image that Ibn Arabi has presented of death and the hereafter, and on the assumption that we ponder and correctly perceive these concepts, in addition to the fact that no doubt will remain about the inherent value and usefulness of the tiny and huge streams of this worldly life, it is also likely that in the light of this perception, human life becomes filled with enthusiasm for traveling from this house to the eternal house, and thus becoming free from the constraints of materiality and the miracles of material and bodily pleasures. And this is the exact final point of all efforts having been made by Ibn Arabi to lead humans toward this pleasant stage and brilliant point of life.

**Keywords:** death, resurrection, meaning of life, Avicenna and Ibn Arabi

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