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Communicative Freedom and the Triadic Structure of Meaningful Life in Habermas's Social Philosophy: An Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: This study examines freedom and the meaning of life in Habermas's social philosophy, focusing on his theory of communicative action. The central problem is the paradox of contemporary societies: the expansion of individual freedoms alongside a deepening crisis of meaning. The objective is to reconstruct Habermas's framework and complement it with Islamic teachings. Unlike liberal Western views, Islam presents freedom as a divine gift linked to truth, responsibility, and *ʿubūdiyyah* (servitude to Allah).

METHOD & FINDING: methodology combining conceptual analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, and critical discourse analysis. The findings show that in Habermas's theory, communicative freedom functions as a precondition, context, and constitutive dimension of meaningful life. However, the analysis also reveals that this framework remains incomplete without a transcendent grounding. From an Islamic perspective, concepts such as ʿubūdiyyah and ḥayāt ṭayyibah (pure life) complement Habermas's model by introducing a vertical dimension of meaning grounded in divine purpose.

CONCLUSION: From an Islamic perspective, the crisis of meaning may also be understood as resulting from the neglect of humanity's vertical relationship with Allah. The findings suggest that communicative freedom may remain vulnerable to relativism without a transcendent grounding. Islam offers "responsible freedom"—freedom within the truth—balancing rights with spiritual responsibilities. From the comparative perspective advanced in this study, a more comprehensive account of meaningful life may incorporate both intersubjective recognition and a transcendent orientation toward the Divine. Habermas's theory can be enriched by integrating Islamic teachings, and the Quranic concept of "pure life" offers a more comprehensive model for human flourishing. Implications for inter-religious dialogue and Islamic education are also discussed.

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Introduction

One of the fundamental contradictions of contemporary societies is the unprecedented expansion of individual freedoms alongside an intensifying sense of meaninglessness and alienation. Numerous sociological and psychological studies suggest that increasing individual autonomy has been accompanied by growing experiences of existential uncertainty and meaning-related distress. This contradiction renders the question of the relationship between freedom and the meaning of life a central issue in contemporary social philosophy. On the one hand, freedom is emphasized as a basic principle of democracy and human rights; on the other, many people, especially youth, face a loss of meaning, identity crisis, and absurdity (Bogaerts et al., 2026, pp. 13–14). This paradox necessitates a rethinking of freedom, the meaning of life, and their interconnection.

Recent empirical studies in sociology and psychology have increasingly confirmed the growing prevalence of meaning-related distress in contemporary societies. Large-scale surveys indicate rising levels of existential anxiety, feelings of emptiness, and perceived lack of purpose, particularly among younger generations (Weissbourd et al., 2023, pp. 1–3; Mandelkow & Hillesund, 2025, p. 182). Psychological research has also linked the weakening of social bonds and increasing individualization to what is described as "meaninglessness syndrome" or "existential vacuum" (Schnell, 2021, pp. 38–40). These findings demonstrate that the crisis of meaning is not merely philosophical but a socially observable phenomenon with measurable psychological and sociological indicators.

Among the philosophers who have addressed this issue, Jürgen Habermas, as the most prominent representative of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, holds a special place. Unlike his predecessors, who were pessimistic about the project of modernity, he, with an optimistic view, sees the deviation of modernity not in the essence of rationality but in the one-sided dominance of instrumental rationality and the colonization of the lifeworld by the system (Habermas, 1987, p. 196).

By proposing the theory of communicative action and emphasizing communicative rationality, Habermas implicitly answers the question of what relationship freedom has with the meaningfulness of life. From his perspective, unlike existentialist thoughts that emphasize individuality and individual decisions, freedom is explained within the context of social relations and communicative actions (Habermas, 1990, p. 89).

The importance of this research is twofold: theoretical and social. At the theoretical level, this article deepens our understanding of concepts of Habermas's social philosophy and analyzes the relationship between freedom and the meaning of life within the framework of the theory of communicative action, which has received less attention. At the social level, given the crisis of the meaning of life in contemporary societies and the increasing feeling of alienation, providing a philosophical analysis of the meaning of life in a communicative and social context can help develop solutions to deal with these crises.

Although Habermas provides a powerful diagnosis of the contemporary crisis of meaning, questions remain regarding the ultimate foundations of meaning and normativity. These unresolved issues motivate the present study's engagement with Islamic thought. In addition to this reconstruction, the

present study aims to bring Habermas's theory into dialogue with Islamic religious teachings. The paper will subsequently evaluate and complement Habermas's account of freedom and meaning by drawing on Quranic concepts such as *ʿubūdiyyah* (servitude to Allah), *shūrā* (consultation), and *ḥayāt ṭayyibah* (pure life). This comparative approach allows us to identify both convergences and critical divergences between communicative rationality and revealed guidance.

Accordingly, the main research question is: In Habermas's social philosophy, what role does freedom play in giving meaning to life, and how are these concepts interrelated within his theory of communicative action and its Islamic comparative extension? More precisely, can a new interpretation of the freedom–meaning relationship be derived from Habermas's theory that explains the paradox of expanding individual freedoms alongside a deepening meaning crisis? This issue can be examined through Habermas's theory, which emphasizes the importance of communicative and social action in the structure of a meaningful life.

Conceptual Framework

This section reconstructs four conceptual categories that constitute the analytical foundation of the present study. Derived from Habermas's social philosophy, these concepts provide the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of the relationship between communicative freedom and the meaning of life.

1. Communicative Action

The core of Habermas's theory is a type of social action in which actors, committed to the principles of honesty, transparency, and equality, seek to achieve rational understanding (Habermas, 1984, pp. 99–102). Unlike strategic action, which aims for individual success and cost-benefit calculation, communicative action operates based on four validity claims (comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness) and aims for the rational coordination of actions through argumentation and dialogue. Habermas believes that a tendency towards understanding is inherent in the structure of language.

2. Lifeworld

The lifeworld is the horizon of shared meanings, traditions, values, and norms that actors draw upon in everyday life and reproduce through communicative action (Habermas, 1987, pp. 112–119). The lifeworld has three main components: culture (shared knowledge resources and interpretive patterns), society (legitimate orders and norms that coordinate collective action), and personality (the capacities and competencies necessary for participation in processes of understanding). The lifeworld acts as an "epistemic background" in which actors participate unconsciously and intersubjectively.

3. Communicative Freedom

Critiquing the traditional dichotomy of negative and positive liberty, Habermas offers "communicative freedom" as an alternative, further developed in his recent work on faith and knowledge (Habermas, 2025, pp. 252–263). From this perspective, an individual is free when they can participate in intersubjective norm-formation, subject validity claims to others' criticism, and reach agreement solely through the force of the better argument, not coercion or social position (Habermas, 1996, pp. 82–86). Habermas identifies four characteristics for this freedom: intersubjective nature, connection to communicative rationality, institutional

dependence, and link to norm legitimacy. "Communicative autonomy" constitutes its core (Habermas, 1990, pp. 67–72).

4. Meaning of Life

According to Habermas's philosophy, the meaning of life is neither pre-existing (essentialist) nor purely individual (existentialist), but an "intersubjective achievement" realized through rational discourses and an internal connection with communicative freedom (Habermas, 1990, pp. 67–72). This meaning is shaped through the process of participation in the reproduction of the lifeworld (culture, society, personality) and in building a more just order through dialogue. From this perspective, life is meaningful when an individual can autonomously participate in collective processes of meaning production, rather than merely being a consumer of imposed or pre-fabricated meanings.

Literature Review

Research on Habermas's thought has largely focused on dimensions such as discursive democracy, discourse ethics, the public sphere, and the critique of instrumental rationality (Naghibzadeh & Norouzi, 2010, pp. 123–142). Among these, a strand of studies has been devoted to elaborating the educational implications of Habermas's theory. For instance, Sohbatlo and Mirzamohammadi (2015) examined critical theory as one of the most influential contemporary approaches in education. Esfahani et al. (2019), emphasizing the theory of communicative action, analyzed and critiqued Habermas's perspective on moral education and examined its applicability to educational systems. Khodadadi and Rezaei (2018) analyzed the place of critical thinking in Habermas's perspective and explained its educational implications for the development of educational systems. Lotfizadeh et al. (2023), using an inferential method, elucidated the foundations and principles of rational education based on communicative rationality. More broadly, Fleming (2012) examined the role of Habermas's critical theory in education, particularly the importance of higher education in fostering democracy. Noddings (2012) explained Habermas's emancipatory theories in education. Holub (2019) investigated the educational implications of Habermas's work with an emphasis on the concept of reification. Lovat (2022), emphasizing the role of communicative action in education, argued that knowledge is constructed through dialogue. Kelly (2023) applied Habermas's discourse theory to educational policy.

Another group of studies has been dedicated to comparative examinations of Habermas's thought with other philosophers. Jamalzadeh and Haji Heidari (2022) compared the critical perspectives of Morteza Motahhari and Habermas towards positivism. Ghobadi, Shamshiri, and Saadatmand (2022) examined the theoretical foundations of "right" and "duty" in the thoughts of Kant and Habermas. Tooback et al. (2022) compared the role of critical thinking in education from the perspectives of Allameh Tabatabai and Habermas. More recently, Latham-Gambi (2026), focusing on the concept of popular sovereignty in Habermas's theory, examined the limitations of communicative rationality.

Despite the breadth of existing contributions, a critical theoretical gap persists. While prior studies have extensively examined discrete dimensions of Habermas's philosophy—such as communicative action, critical thinking, moral education, and democratic participation—they have largely overlooked the dialectical and constitutive

relationship between communicative freedom and the meaning of life. These concepts collectively provide the basis for the subsequent reconstruction of the triadic relationship between communicative freedom and meaningful life. This lacuna is significant because it limits our understanding of how Habermas's social philosophy might diagnose the contemporary crisis of meaning. Addressing this gap constitutes the primary motivation and scholarly contribution of the present study.

1. The Relationship between Freedom and Meaning of Life in the Theory of Communicative Action

The main argument is that in Habermas's social philosophy, freedom and the meaning of life are not two independent concepts but are dialectically intertwined. This relationship can be formulated as a triadic analysis: freedom as the condition of possibility for meaning, freedom as the context for the realization of meaning, and freedom as a dimension of a meaningful life. These three aspects, although analytically distinguishable, are in practice interwoven and mutually interdependent.

1.1. Theoretical Foundations of Communicative Action and the Redefinition of Freedom

Before examining the freedom–meaning relationship, it is necessary to outline Habermas's key theoretical pillars: his paradigm shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, the distinction between communicative and strategic action, the dual-level analysis of society as lifeworld and system, and his redefinition of freedom as participation in understanding (Habermas, 1984, pp. 102–110; Habermas, 1987, pp. 154–156).

1.1.1. From Philosophy of Consciousness to Philosophy of Language

Habermas's fundamental intellectual transition—from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language—began in the late 1960s and matured in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), representing his attempt to overcome modern philosophy's deadlocks (Habermas, 1972, pp. 214–215). The philosophy of consciousness, from Descartes to Husserl, emphasized the self-grounding subject and the "subject–object" relationship as the fundamental model of knowledge and action. In contrast, influenced by American pragmatism, German hermeneutics, and late philosophy of language, Habermas argues that rationality is realized in the intersubjective structures of language and communicative action (Finlayson, 2005, pp. 18–22). The unit of analysis is not the isolated "I" but the communicative "we."

1.1.2. Distinction between Strategic Action and Communicative Action

Habermas presents a fourfold typology of action—teleological/instrumental, normatively regulated, dramaturgical, and communicative—which he condenses into a dichotomy between "communicative action" (aiming at rational understanding through commitment to honesty, transparency, and equality) and "strategic action" (aiming to gain advantage by using language as a tool of manipulation) (Habermas, 1984, pp. 102–110). To distinguish these, he introduces four validity claims: comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness (Habermas, 1984, p. 99).

Communication possesses moral validity only when participants, under equal and domination-free conditions, can freely critique claims.

1.1.3. Lifeworld and System: Two Levels of Social Analysis

Habermas distinguishes two levels of social analysis: the lifeworld—the horizon of shared meanings, traditions, values, and norms reproduced through communicative action—and the system—rationalized economic and administrative structures coordinated through money and power (Habermas, 1987, pp. 154–156).

The main pathology of modern societies is the "colonization of the lifeworld by the system": the intrusion of money and power logic into spheres (family, education, culture, personal relationships) that inherently require communicative coordination (Habermas, 1987, p. 196). This process produces a reduction of shared meanings, erosion of social trust, increased helplessness, and weakening of collective identity (Condon, 2025, pp. 89–92).

1.1.4. Critique of the Traditional Dichotomy of Freedom and the Proposal of "Freedom as Participation in Understanding"

Habermas argues that "negative liberty"—freedom from interference (Berlin, 2002, p. 169)—is necessary but insufficient, as it confines choice and ignores desire formation (Goodman, 2001, pp. 25–28). He also critiques "positive liberty" (self-realization capacity) for its risk of justifying domination through claims to know the "true self" (Cooke, 2021, p. 196). Against this dichotomy, he proposes "freedom as participation in understanding": a free person participates in intersubjective norm-formation (Habermas, 1996, pp. 82–86).

This freedom possesses an intersubjective nature, connection to communicative rationality, institutional dependence, and a link to norm legitimacy.

1.2. The Relationship between Freedom and Meaning of Life: A Triadic Analysis

The central argument of this article is that in Habermas's social philosophy, freedom and the meaning of life are not two independent concepts but are dialectically intertwined. This relationship can be formulated as a triadic analysis: freedom as the condition of possibility for meaning, freedom as the context for the realization of meaning, and freedom as a dimension of a meaningful life. These three aspects, although analytically distinguishable, are in practice interwoven and mutually interdependent.

1.2.1. Freedom as the Condition of Possibility for Meaning

The first and most fundamental role of freedom is its function as a condition of possibility. Meaning formed through coercion, indoctrination, or uncritical acceptance lacks authenticity. Life is meaningful when an individual can actively and consciously participate in forming norms and values (Habermas, 1990, pp. 67–72). This is "communicative autonomy": the ability to participate in rational discourse as an equal and free member.

To understand this aspect, we must attend to Habermas's critique of "imposed meanings." In traditional societies and modern societies whose lifeworld has been colonized, many meanings are transmitted in an imposed manner—through uncritical traditions, dominant ideologies, mass media controlled by power, or closed educational systems (Habermas, 1987, pp. 203–205). In such circumstances, even if the individual accepts those meanings, this acceptance arises from conditioning and internalized domination, not from freedom and consciousness. Drawing on critical theory and the concept of "false

consciousness," Habermas emphasizes that many beliefs and values individuals regard as "their own" and "authentic" are products of ideological mechanisms and hidden dominations (Finlayson, 2005, pp. 42–45).

The individual encounters not their authentic self but a "self" constructed by social powers—the phenomenon Erich Fromm called "escape from freedom," which Habermas reinterprets as colonization of the lifeworld. Communicative autonomy is the condition for authentic meaning through three components: distinguishing authentic from false desires via intersubjective critique; active participation in norm-formation; and subjecting validity claims to others' criticism (Habermas, 1972, p. 214). This process immunizes meaning against dogmatism and imposition, grounding it in rational discourse and ensuring it is genuinely one's own.

From this perspective, the crisis of meaning in contemporary societies is rooted in the weakening of communicative autonomy. When media, educational institutions, and cultural structures fall under money and power logic, imposed meanings replace authentic ones, and individuals lose the capacity to distinguish authentic desires from false ones (Condon, 2025, p. 89).

Although individuals may enjoy formal freedom (negative liberty) to choose among multiple options, these options are produced within a predetermined framework and have no connection to authentic desires. In Habermas's words, "freedom of choice among false options is itself a form of unfreedom" (McCarthy, 1984, p. 156).

Thus, communicative freedom entails the capacity to participate in determining options and norms themselves, not merely choosing among predetermined alternatives—Habermas's fundamental distinction between "autonomous" and "arbitrary" freedom. Freedom is not an external prerequisite but an intrinsic, constitutive dimension of meaning's actualization. Without communicative autonomy, any ascribed meaning remains inauthentic, lacking the agent's genuine ratification through rational reflection.

1.2.2. Freedom as the Context of Meaning's Realization

The second role concerns freedom as the context of realization. Meaning does not emerge in individual isolation but is formed within the shared lifeworld and social interactions (Habermas, 1987, pp. 119–122).

This claim is rooted in Habermas's philosophical anthropology: the human being is inherently communicative and social, and identity is constituted through intersubjective meaning formation.

The lifeworld, as the horizon of shared meanings, traditions, and norms, is the context for communicative actions. Habermas draws on Gadamer's "pre-understanding" and Husserl's "life-world," but unlike them, he emphasizes the dynamic and criticizable nature of the lifeworld (Hearfield, 2004, p. 123).

The three components of the lifeworld—culture, society, and personality—are each connected to the meaning of life. Culture provides semantic resources—stories, myths, narratives, philosophical and religious concepts—that individuals draw upon to give meaning to their lives (Habermas, 1987, p. 138); these resources are neither predetermined nor immutable but subject to reinterpretation and critique.

In Habermas's framework, freedom transcends the creative use of cultural resources by requiring active participation in their reproduction. Although meaning—such as

"living well" or "being a good person"—is inevitably embedded within social norms, a free person does not merely conform. Genuine freedom lies in the capacity to participate in the formation, critique, and revision of social norms, thereby transforming the lifeworld through communicative agency (Habermas, 1996, pp. 82–86).

Personality refers to capacities enabling participation in understanding processes—linguistic ability, reasoning, social role-taking, and recognizing one's own needs and interests (Habermas, 1987, p. 140). These competencies are cultivated through socialization.

Habermas explains the crisis of meaning through the "colonization of the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1987, p. 196): the intrusion of money and power logic into spheres requiring communicative action. This colonization occurs at three levels: culture (commodification of meanings), society (replacing understanding with power and interest), and personality (rigidification of identity under media influence). In such a situation, the crisis arises not from a lack of semantic options but from the individual's inability to participate authentically in meaning production. This is the "paradox of freedom": increased formal freedom concurrent with decreased communicative freedom. The solution lies in restoring communicative freedom and strengthening the lifeworld against system domination—establishing conditions for collective meaning production rather than mere consumption of pre-fabricated meanings.

1.2.3. Freedom as a Constitutive Dimension of Meaningful Life

The preceding analysis establishes that communicative freedom serves not only as a condition of possibility and social context for meaning but also as a constitutive dimension of meaningful life itself. The experience of autonomous participation in communicative processes is intrinsically integral to meaningful existence (Habermas, 1996, pp. 104–108). This claim is rooted in Habermas's conception of autonomy and human dignity. Human dignity is not merely an abstract concept but the result of mutual recognition in social relations; an individual feels dignity when recognized by others as an autonomous being worthy of participation in collective decision-making (Habermas, 2010, pp. 15–20). Such recognition is achieved through participation in rational discourses. Accordingly, meaning cannot be defined independently of the experience of freedom and participation. Based on our reconstruction, the constitutive dimension may be articulated through four interrelated elements:

Autonomy in thought and action: The individual can decide and act based on reflection and reasoning, not on compulsion or coercion. This is the aspect emphasized in Kant's philosophy, but Habermas transfers it from the individual level to the intersubjective level (Habermas, 1990, pp. 89–92).

Participation in community: The individual can be an active and effective member of their community and share in shaping the collective destiny. This participation is not only a right but also part of human good and flourishing. A person deprived of participation has lost a significant part of their possibility for self-realization.

Mutual recognition: The individual is recognized by others as a being worthy of respect and participation. This recognition is the basis of self-esteem and the feeling of worthiness, which itself is part of the meaning of life.

Solidarity with others: The individual establishes bonds of solidarity, finding meaning beyond individuality. Habermas regards solidarity as a principal normative achievement of communicative action; this study interprets it as a dimension of meaningful life (Fleming, 2012, p. 8).

These elements are internally related and mutually reinforcing. Autonomy without participation degenerates into isolation; participation without autonomy becomes conformity; recognition without solidarity remains formal; and solidarity without recognition tends toward homogenization. What integrates them is communicative action and the democratic public sphere.

From this perspective, communicative freedom is not a prelude to meaning but part of meaningful life itself. Individuals who enjoy it not only discover meaning but experience freedom as one of life's meanings. Emancipation and meaning are deeply intertwined. This interdependence is visible in Habermas's diagnosis of modernity: erosion of communicative participation undermines both freedom and meaningful existence. His critique suggests that reducing citizens to passive consumers deprives them of freedom and authentic meaning (Habermas, 1987, p. 203). The crisis of meaning is thus not merely intellectual or psychological but a crisis of social structures that have weakened conditions for communicative participation and collective meaning formation.

1.2.4. The Interconnection of the Three Aspects within Communicative Action

The three aspects, though analytically distinguishable, are deeply interconnected and mutually dependent. The relationship may be reconstructed as a dialectic of precondition, process, and end-state, each dimension presupposing and reinforcing the others. This dialectical structure explains why freedom and meaning cannot be understood as independent concepts but are bound together. Communicative freedom makes meaning formation possible, while the pursuit of meaning simultaneously deepens and sustains communicative freedom. From this perspective, Habermas's theory may be interpreted not merely as a social theory of modernity but also as a normative framework for understanding the conditions of meaningful human existence. Meaning is sought neither in the isolated subject nor in fixed norms but in the dynamic processes of communication, mutual understanding, and collective self-formation. The triadic framework furnishes a systematic articulation of the constitutive relationship between freedom and meaningful existence. At the same time, the explanatory power and limitations of this reconstruction must be critically examined.

1.3. Critical Assessment of Habermas's Theory

1.3.1. Theoretical Contributions

Habermas's theory offers several important contributions to contemporary social philosophy. First, by rejecting methodological individualism, it demonstrates that both freedom and meaning emerge within intersubjective relations rather than through isolated acts of self-determination (Nowzari, 2007, p. 156). Second, it reconceptualizes freedom not as mere non-interference but as participation in mutual understanding and collective self-determination (Habermas, 1996, p. 104). Third, it provides a sociological explanation of the crisis of meaning by locating its origins in the colonization of the lifeworld rather than in individual moral failure

(Habermas, 1987, p. 196; Condon, 2025, p. 89). Fourth, as critical theory, it links social diagnosis with emancipation, identifying conditions for undistorted communication and democratic participation (Finlayson, 2005, p. 12). Fifth, unlike self-grounding philosophies, it emphasizes that identity and meaning are constituted through mutual recognition and responsibility toward others (Habermas, 1990, p. 89). These contributions demonstrate the considerable explanatory and normative power of Habermas's theory.

1.3.2. Limitations and Critiques

Despite its strengths, Habermas's theory has been criticized from various perspectives, grouped into four categories.

Structural-Social Critiques: By assuming an "ideal speech situation," Habermas neglects deep economic, cultural, and gender inequalities (Goodman, 2001, p. 42). Critics like Fraser and Young argue that in real societies, individuals are in highly unequal positions, and "equal participation" for marginalized groups is an illusion.

Epistemological Critiques: Several objections have been raised concerning the epistemological foundations of communicative rationality. First, the theory may be vulnerable to forms of moral relativism insofar as different societies can define divergent standards of rational discourse, thereby weakening universal validity claims (Mohammadi Munfared, 2020, p. 34). Second, critics such as Lyotard (1984, p. 78) and Mouffe (2000, pp. 45–50) argue that excessive emphasis on consensus risks suppressing disagreement and excluding dissenting voices. Third, the ideal speech situation has been criticized as an unrealizable normative abstraction rather than an attainable social condition (Mohammadi Munfared, 2020, p. 37). Fourth, Habermas is often said to privilege procedural questions concerning the formation of norms while devoting comparatively less attention to their substantive content (Finlayson, 2005, pp. 89–90). Finally, Latham-Gambi (2026, pp. 152–172) argues that communicative rationality alone cannot adequately explain political legitimacy because representative claims and the symbolic dimensions of democracy exceed the boundaries of communicative rationality.

Ontological Critiques: Habermas's theory is strongly logocentric and rationalist, neglecting emotions, intuition, the body, the material world, and aesthetic dimensions in meaning-making (Hearfield, 2004, p. 135). Poverty, hunger, illness, and violence limit communicative freedom; meaning for a hungry person is defined by basic needs, not rational participation.

Cultural Critiques: Although Habermas has addressed rationality and faith in *Also a History of Philosophy* (Habermas, 2025, p. 262), his worldview remains rooted in the Western Enlightenment, and its value priorities (individualism, autonomy, secularism) may be incompatible with non-Western cultures (Naghibzadeh & Norouzi, 2010, p. 138). Religion is a primary source of meaning for many, and neglecting it weakens the theory's universality.

However, Habermas's later writings reveal a significant reconsideration of religion. In *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2008) and *Also a History of Philosophy* (2025), he acknowledges that religious traditions contain semantic resources unavailable to secular reason and advocates complementary learning. Despite this shift, his framework remains methodologically agnostic and does not recognize religious truth-claims as independent sources of normativity. This unresolved

tension raises the question of whether religious traditions can provide normative resources beyond post-metaphysical rationality. The following section addresses this question through an Islamic perspective.

2. An Islamic Perspective on Communicative Freedom and the Meaning of Life

Having reconstructed Habermas's account of communicative freedom and identified its principal limitations, this section examines whether Islamic conceptions of freedom and meaningful life can complement or challenge his framework. The objective is not to juxtapose a religious doctrine with a secular theory, but to investigate whether Habermas's post-metaphysical account of meaning is sufficient or requires a transcendent horizon capable of grounding ultimate meaning and normativity. The discussion proceeds in three steps: first, Habermas's post-secular turn is briefly examined; second, Islamic conceptions of freedom and meaningful life are reconstructed as philosophical categories; finally, a critical dialogue is developed to evaluate the extent to which Islamic thought supplements, revises, or challenges the theory of communicative action.

2.1. Habermas, Post-Secular Society, and the Return of Religion

In his later writings, Habermas substantially revised his earlier understanding of religion, acknowledging that religious traditions contain semantic and motivational resources that secular reason alone cannot fully reproduce (Habermas, 2008, pp. 101–115).

Consequently, democratic societies should regard religious communities as legitimate participants in public deliberation rather than as remnants of a disappearing pre-modern world. This development reflects what Habermas calls a "complementary learning process" between religious and secular citizens. Religious citizens are expected to translate their normative claims into generally accessible language, while secular citizens must adopt an epistemic openness toward the possible truth contents embedded in religious traditions. Religion is therefore no longer treated merely as a residual phenomenon but as a continuing source of moral insight and social solidarity. For the present study, this post-secular turn is significant because it partially reopens the possibility that religious traditions may contribute to the constitution of meaning and the reproduction of the lifeworld. Nevertheless, Habermas continues to insist that the legitimacy of norms ultimately depends on their translation into generally accessible secular reasons. Consequently, while his later thought narrows the distance between communicative rationality and religious worldviews, it stops short of recognizing transcendence itself as an independent source of meaning. The post-secular turn thus mitigates, but does not overcome, the post-metaphysical limitations of his account.

2.2. The Concept of Freedom in Islam: Divine Gift, Responsibility, and *ʿubūdiyyah*

In Islamic political philosophy and ethics, *ḥurriyyah* (freedom) is not an end in itself but a means to achieve *ʿubūdiyyah* (servitude to Allah). Unlike liberal Western views that define freedom primarily as the absence of external constraints (negative liberty) or self-mastery (positive liberty), Islam grounds freedom in the recognition of a transcendent purpose. As the Quran states: "I did not create the jinn and humans except that they may worship Me" (Quran 51:56). Freedom in Islam

means liberation from all bonds that hinder human growth and perfection—not absolute license, but freedom within the truth (Hosseini Khamenei, 1998, pp. 13–41). This conception has been extensively developed in the Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly in discussions of *ikhtiyār* (voluntary action) and the relationship between freedom and servitude to Allah (Naṣr, 2006, pp. 63–64; Leaman, 2009, pp. 154–156).

From a philosophical perspective, Islamic freedom cannot be reduced either to negative liberty or to positive self-mastery. Rather, it represents a form of teleological freedom in which human autonomy is realized through orientation toward an objective conception of the good. In this sense, *ʿubūdiyyah* does not negate freedom; instead, it constitutes the condition for liberation from arbitrary desires, social domination, and existential alienation. The Quran explicitly rejects coercion in matters of belief: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Quran 2:256). Similarly: "The truth is from your Lord; so let whoever wishes have faith, and whoever wishes be faithless" (Quran 18:29). These verses establish a foundational principle: faith must be adopted freely and consciously. However, Islamic thought distinguishes between freedom of conscience, which occupies a highly protected position in Islamic thought, and the public expression of beliefs, which may be regulated to protect social order and religious values. As Hosseini Khamenei (1998) notes, Islam does not permit the propagation of corrupt or deviant ideas that undermine the foundations of Islamic society. Martyr Motahhari emphasized that freedom of belief does not mean endorsing all beliefs, but rather negating coercion in accepting religion.

Regarding freedom of thought, Islam places a high value on reflection and inquiry. The Prophet Muhammad said, "One hour of reflection is better than one year of worship." Imām al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī stated that true worship lies in pondering deeply over God's creation (Sharifani & Marefat, 2021, p. 147). The Quran repeatedly invites humans to contemplate the signs of Allah in the heavens, the earth, and their own souls. Yet, when thought transforms into public speech or writing, it must respect ethical and religious boundaries. Insults to religious sanctities, spreading rumors, and inciting discord are not permitted.

During Imam ʿAlī's governance, freedom of expression was upheld as a fundamental principle. He not only welcomed constructive criticism but also granted opponents the liberty to articulate their viewpoints without apprehension. This commitment is epitomized in his address to the people of Kufa: "I do not have the authority to compel you to do something you do not desire" (Sharīf al-Raḍī, 2008, Sermon 208).

Freedom of expression in Islam is neither absolute nor excessively restricted; it is responsible and goal-oriented. Imam ʿAlī (a.s.) famously said: "Bring opinions face to face with each other so that correct thought may be born from them" (Amidi, 1987, p. 266). Historically, Imam ʿAlī allowed the Kharijites to express their opposing views publicly in the mosque (Ibn Athīr, 1965, Vol. 2, p. 398). However, when freedom of expression leads to insulting religious sanctities or undermining public security, Islamic governance has the right to intervene. The key difference from Western liberalism is that Islam rejects the absolutization of free speech that permits blasphemy or the promotion of moral corruption.

Political freedom in Islam is realized through the concept of *shūrā* (consultation): "Their affair is conducted by consultation among them" (Quran 42:38). Citizens have the right to choose their leaders and offer constructive criticism within the framework of Islamic law. Unlike Western democracy, where popular will is sovereign, in Islamic governance legitimacy derives from a combination of popular consent and adherence to divine norms. Political participation is ultimately oriented toward the realization of justice as defined by divine norms.

In summary, the Islamic conception of freedom may be characterized as a normatively guided form of freedom grounded in objective moral truths, thereby challenging the procedural foundations of Habermas's account. For Habermas, norms are legitimate if they result from an ideal discourse situation. For Islam, a norm's legitimacy depends ultimately on its correspondence with God's will. This understanding finds further support in contemporary scholarship: Mirzaei and Abedian (2023) conclude that "the limit of human freedom in the school of the infallible imams is where freedom becomes a barrier to the eternal happiness of an individual or human society." This formulation resonates with "responsible freedom": freedom is not an absolute end but a means oriented toward human flourishing in both this life and the hereafter. Such a perspective provides a critical counterpoint to Habermas's procedural secularism, which brackets questions of ultimate meaning and eternal felicity.

2.3. The Meaning of Life in Islam: Hayat Tayyiba as Discovery, Not Invention

Habermas defines the meaning of life as an "intersubjective achievement" realized through communicative action within the lifeworld. Islam shares the emphasis on social embeddedness – humans cannot construct meaning in isolation. However, Islam adds a vertical dimension that Habermas's post-metaphysical framework systematically excludes.

Philosophically, the concept of hayat tayyiba challenges modern constructivist accounts of meaning. Whereas post-metaphysical theories generally regard meaning as the outcome of human practices of interpretation and social interaction, the Islamic conception maintains that meaning possesses an objective and transcendent dimension that is discovered rather than invented. Human beings participate in meaning, but they are not its ultimate creators.

The Quranic concept of *ḥayāt ṭayyibah* (pure/good life) is introduced in Surah al-Naḥl: "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while being a believer—We will surely cause them to live a good (pure) life" (Quran 16:97). This verse establishes three conditions for a meaningful life: (1) *īmān* (faith)—a conscious relationship with Allah; (2) *ʿamal ṣāliḥ* (righteous action)—ethical behavior; (3) divine reward—the ultimate validation of meaning beyond death.

Islamic philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā understand meaningful life within the framework of *al-ḥarakat al-jawhariyyah* (substantial motion), according to which human existence is an existential journey toward perfection and nearness to Allah. Meaning is therefore rooted in the ontological structure of reality itself rather than being solely the product of social construction or subjective choice.

Unlike Habermas, who brackets metaphysical questions, Islam insists that the

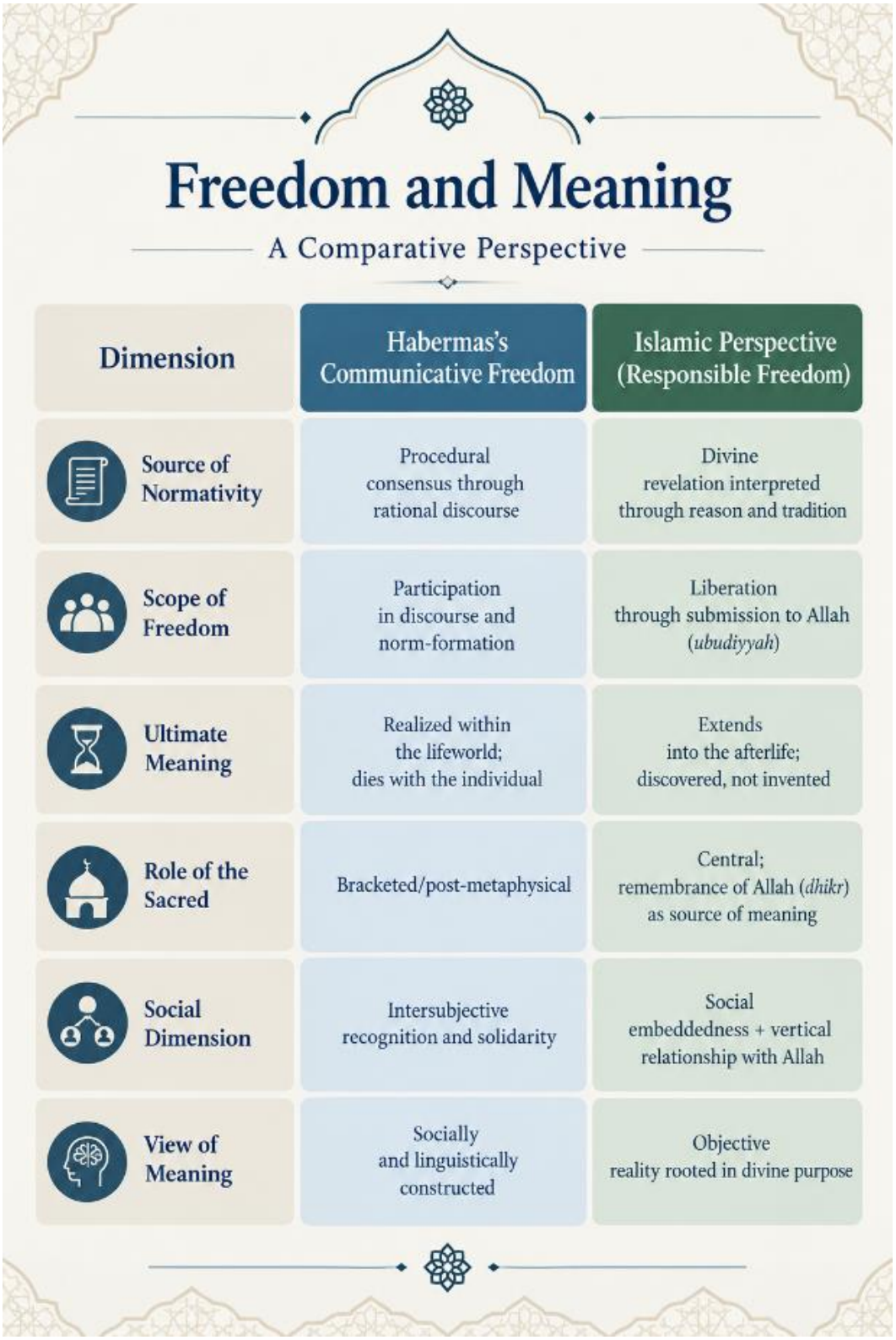
crisis of meaning stems not only from the colonization of the lifeworld but also from forgetting Allah: "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (Quran 13:28). Without this vertical anchor, communicative freedom remains fragile and prone to relativism.

A saying attributed to Imam ʿAlī (a.s.) captures this existential orientation in concise form: "May Allah have mercy on the person who prepares for himself, prepares for his grave, and knows from where he has come, where he is, and to where he is going." Mullā Ṣadrā interprets these three questions as referring respectively to knowledge of *mabdaʾ* (the origin), *ṭarīq* (the path), and *maʿād* (the ultimate return), thereby presenting human existence as a trajectory from its origin, through its present mode of being, toward its ultimate end (Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, 1945, pp. 49–50). This highlights three existential questions: origin, present life, and destination. According to Mullā Ṣadrā, the meaning of life is not subjectively invented but discovered through intellectual and spiritual perfection (Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 137). This contrasts sharply with existentialist and post-metaphysical views that treat meaning as a human construction. Ayatollah Ṣadr (2002) distinguishes three lifestyles: material, future-oriented, and religious (based on servitude to Allah). Only the third gives true meaning to life. This difference reflects two competing philosophical anthropologies. Habermas understands human beings primarily as communicative agents who achieve autonomy through intersubjective recognition. By contrast, the Islamic tradition conceives human beings as simultaneously rational, social, and transcendent beings whose fulfillment requires both horizontal relationships with others and a vertical relationship with the Divine. Consequently, communicative rationality may be a necessary condition for meaningful life, but for religious traditions it does not constitute a sufficient condition.

3. Adjustment of Findings and Islamic Responses to the Four Critiques of Communicative Freedom

In total, and in accordance with the findings of the research, four limitations can be stated in Habermas's account of communicative freedom: structural, epistemological, ontological, and cultural. From an Islamic perspective, these limitations can be addressed through a complementary framework in which social participation, reason, embodied and spiritual existence, and transcendence are treated as interconnected dimensions of meaningful life. At the same time, and before stating these limitations, it is necessary to refer to the research findings in a comparative manner in the figure below.

Figure 1: Comparative Analysis of Habermas's Communicative Freedom and Islamic Perspective



Freedom and Meaning

A Comparative Perspective

Dimension	Habermas's Communicative Freedom	Islamic Perspective (Responsible Freedom)
Source of Normativity	Procedural consensus through rational discourse	Divine revelation interpreted through reason and tradition
Scope of Freedom	Participation in discourse and norm-formation	Liberation through submission to Allah (*ubudiyyah*)
Ultimate Meaning	Realized within the lifeworld; dies with the individual	Extends into the afterlife; discovered, not invented
Role of the Sacred	Bracketed/post-metaphysical	Central; remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) as source of meaning
Social Dimension	Intersubjective recognition and solidarity	Social embeddedness + vertical relationship with Allah
View of Meaning	Socially and linguistically constructed	Objective reality rooted in divine purpose

3.1. Structural Critique: Justice as a Substantive Condition of Freedom

The structural critique questions whether communicative freedom can be realized under conditions of economic, social, and cultural inequality. From an Islamic perspective, *ʿadl* (justice) is not merely a procedural requirement for participation but a substantive moral obligation. Social solidarity, economic responsibility, *zakāt* (alms), and the prohibition of exploitation are intended to reduce conditions that undermine human dignity and meaningful participation. Thus, whereas Habermas primarily emphasizes the communicative conditions under which individuals can participate as equals, Islamic thought adds substantive concern for the material and social conditions that make such participation possible. Communicative freedom therefore requires not only the absence of domination within discourse but also social arrangements that protect human dignity and basic needs (Jamal, 2022, pp. 247–259).

3.2. Epistemological Critique: Reason and Revelation

The epistemological critique concerns the limits of communicative rationality as a basis for universal normativity, particularly when consensus cannot by itself determine substantive truth. Islamic philosophy approaches this problem through a complementary relationship between reason and revelation (Kalin, 2014, pp. 98–162). Reason remains necessary for interpretation, deliberation, and critical inquiry, but it is not regarded as sufficient for determining the ultimate purpose of human existence. Revelation provides a transcendent normative horizon that cannot be generated solely through communicative consensus. From this perspective, communicative rationality remains valuable for interpreting and applying norms, while revelation provides substantive orientation concerning truth, moral purpose, and human flourishing.

3.3. Ontological Critique: The Integrated Human Being

The ontological critique argues that an excessive emphasis on rational communication may understate the roles of emotion, embodiment, intuition, spirituality, and material existence in the constitution of meaning. Islamic anthropology provides a broader account of the human being through concepts such as *fiṭrah* (innate nature), *qalb* (heart), *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence), and *tazkiyah* (purification) (Naṣr, 2006, pp. 1–20). These concepts indicate that human flourishing involves not only rational and communicative capacities but also moral cultivation, spiritual awareness, affective experience, and embodied existence. Consequently, meaningful life cannot be reduced to participation in discourse. Communicative interaction remains important, but it constitutes only one dimension of a more comprehensive anthropology in which intellectual, moral, emotional, social, and spiritual development are interconnected.

3.4. Cultural Critique: Transcendence and Objective Meaning

The cultural critique questions whether Habermas's post-metaphysical framework can adequately account for societies in which religious traditions remain central sources of identity, value, and meaning. Islamic thought offers a distinctive response because it does not treat religion merely as a cultural reservoir of semantic resources. Concepts such as

ubudiyyah and hayat tayyiba locate human freedom and meaningful existence within a transcendent relationship with God (Naṣr, 2002, pp. 241–255). Meaning is therefore not solely constructed through intersubjective interaction but is also related to an objective moral and teleological order. This does not eliminate the importance of dialogue or social recognition; rather, it places them within a broader horizon of divine purpose.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between communicative freedom and the meaning of life within Habermas's theory of communicative action, complemented by a critical dialogue with Islamic conceptions of freedom and meaningful life. The central problem addressed was the paradox of expanding individual freedoms alongside a deepening crisis of meaning in contemporary societies. The findings demonstrate that Habermas, by transcending the traditional positive/negative liberty dichotomy and proposing "freedom as participation in understanding," offers a novel conception of freedom intrinsically linked to meaning. The triadic analysis revealed that freedom serves as the condition of possibility for meaning, the context for its realization, and an intrinsic dimension of meaningful life. These three aspects form a dialectical whole, indicating that the contemporary crisis of meaning results not from an excess of freedom but from the weakening of communicative contexts for meaning production—what Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld by the system." However, this study suggests that such a framework may remain primarily horizontal and that, particularly in religious contexts, a complementary dimension of transcendence can enrich its account of existential meaning.

Habermas's later post-secular reflections acknowledge the semantic potential of religious traditions, yet his translation proviso demonstrates that religion remains incorporated within a fundamentally post-metaphysical framework. Consequently, while post-secular theory opens new possibilities for dialogue, it leaves unresolved whether transcendence itself can serve as an independent source of meaning. In relation to existing literature, these findings are largely consistent with previous studies emphasizing communicative rationality and lifeworld structure. However, the critical assessment confirmed identified limitations: structural inequalities, epistemological challenges, and cultural-historical biases. The present study extends this literature by highlighting the limitations of purely immanent accounts of meaning and introducing Islamic concepts such as *ʿubūdiyyah* (servitude to Allah) and *ḥayāt ṭayyibah* (pure life) as complementary interpretive resources.

The comparative analysis demonstrated that while Habermas's communicative freedom provides a powerful critique of methodological individualism and a valuable account of meaning's social conditions, it remains theoretically incomplete when addressing religious forms of meaning presupposing a transcendent foundation. The Quranic concept of *ḥayāt ṭayyibah* integrates social participation, moral responsibility, and divine orientation within a unified framework. The Islamic conception of responsible freedom offers an alternative perspective in which freedom is exercised within a horizon of truth and ultimate purpose. For societies where religion continues to shape the lifeworld, a

more comprehensive response to the crisis of meaning may be enriched by integrating intersubjective rationality with a transcendent orientation toward the Creator.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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