

## Revisiting Meaning in Life from the Perspective of the Teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.) and Positive Psychology

Mohammad Tashakori Abghad<sup>1</sup> | Gholamali moghaddam<sup>2</sup>

1. Ph.D. Candidate in Islamic Theology (Kalām), Department of Islamic Wisdom and Theology, Navvab Higher School, Mashhad, Iran. (Corresponding Author) Email: tashakorikalam1400@gmail.com

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Razavi University of Islamic Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.

### Article info

### Abstract

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The concept of “meaning in life” has consistently been one of the most profound and enduring concerns of human beings throughout history. In the complex and fast-paced contemporary world, with the ever increasing spread of identity and spiritual crises, positive psychology has sought to significantly contribute to enhancing psychological well-being and imbuing human life with meaning by focusing on key concepts such as hope, inner satisfaction, existential purposefulness, and the flourishing of human capabilities. On the other hand, the rich and edifying teachings of Islam, particularly the illuminating teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), offer a clear, logical, and practical path for explicating the ultimate purpose and meaning of life based on components such as sincere servitude (‘ubūdiyyah), true knowledge (ma‘rifah), selfless service to God’s creation, and the attainment of Divine pleasure. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, this article undertakes a comparative and in-depth re-examination of the meaning of life from the perspective of positive psychology in direct comparison and contrast with Imam Ridā’s teachings. Through a meticulous analysis of the content of select traditions and invaluable statements of Imam Reza (A.S.) and their systematic comparison with the foundational theories and concepts of positive psychology, the authors clearly demonstrate the existence of a remarkable, meaningful, and constructive synergy between these two authentic and valuable sources in the domains of meaning, hope, value-centeredness, and self-actualization. The research findings indicate that the simultaneous, balanced, and judicious utilization of authentic religious sources and modern psychological knowledge can provide a comprehensive, balanced, practical, and exceptionally effective approach to imbuing meaning into the perilous and bewildered life of contemporary humanity.

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, Meaning in Life, Imam Reza’s Teachings, Mental Health, Faith, Spirituality.



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## **1. Introduction**

The concept of “meaning in life” has consistently been, as one of the most fundamental existential concerns of humanity, the focal point of attention for thinkers, philosophers, and mystics throughout history. Beyond material needs, human beings require a profound understanding of the reason for living, their role in the world, the manner of confronting suffering, and the ultimate destination of existence—a need today referred to as the search for meaning. In the complex and fast-paced contemporary world, the proliferation of identity and spiritual crises, feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, and existential anxieties have rendered the necessity of rethinking this concept more apparent than ever. Amidst this, two powerful intellectual systems exist to address this crisis. On the one hand, positive psychology, as a novel branch of psychological science, moving beyond pathology-oriented approaches, has focused on the study of human strengths, virtues, and the cultivation of positive capacities such as hope, purposefulness, and meaning to achieve lasting well-being and a flourishing life. On the other hand, rich religious traditions, particularly the edifying teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), have consistently delineated a complete model of a meaningful life through concepts such as servitude (‘ubūdiyyah), knowledge (ma‘rifah), service to creation, and the attainment of Divine pleasure. Recognizing the existing research gap in the systematic comparison of these two domains, particularly concerning the teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), this article undertakes a comparative and in-depth re-examination of meaning in life from these two perspectives.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The primary objective of this research is to comparatively re-examine and analyze the concept of “meaning in life” from the perspective of positive psychology (drawing upon the views of Viktor Frankl and Martin Seligman) and the illuminating teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.). In line with this objective, the article seeks to answer the following fundamental questions: What are the principal and foundational components shaping meaning in life within each of these two intellectual systems? What points of convergence, similarities, and structural differences exist between these two approaches in explaining the source, ultimate purpose, and manner of attaining meaning, particularly in confronting suffering and hardship? And finally, how can an intelligent utilization of the complementary capacities of these two valuable sources formulate and present a comprehensive, balanced, and

effective approach to imbuing meaning into the bewildered and crisis-ridden life of contemporary humanity and enhancing their psycho-spiritual health? By posing these questions, this research seeks to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue and a constructive synergy between modern scientific findings and profound religious teachings.

### **3. Methodology**

This research, in terms of its purpose, falls under the category of fundamental applied research, and in terms of its nature and method, it is a descriptive-analytical study with a comparative approach. The theoretical framework of the article is a synthesis of the foundational theories of positive psychology, particularly Frankl's logotherapy and Seligman's PERMA model of well-being, and the epistemic-doctrinal foundations of the teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), including the concepts of monotheism (tawḥīd), servitude (‘ubūdiyyah), faith (īmān), patience (ṣabr), contentment (Reza), and trust in God (tawakkul). The research data were collected using a library-documentary method and thematic-analytical note-taking. The primary sources for this study consist of, on the one hand, the written works of positive psychology, and on the other hand, authoritative Shi’i hadith collections such as ‘Uyūn Akhbār al-Reza, Tuḥaf al-‘Uqūl, Wasā’il al-Shī’ah, Biḥār al-Anwār, and Al-Kāfi. Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative content analysis method; thus, the relevant texts were extracted, coded, and classified into principal categories (purpose, coherence, significance, hope, faith, patience, and confrontation with suffering), and then the concepts derived from the two systems were compared with one another along these axes. The research population includes all texts related to the subject, and sampling was conducted purposively based on theoretical saturation.

### **4. Findings**

The findings of this comparative research indicate remarkable and meaningful synergies between positive psychology and Razavi teachings in conceptualizing “meaning in life,” which are manifested in several key axes. First, both systems emphasize the intrinsic value of meaning for mental health and a flourishing life. Frankl considers the absence of meaning the source of the existential vacuum, and Imam Reza (A.S.), in the Hadith of the Golden Chain (Silsilat al-Dhahab), introduces monotheism and the recognition of Divine Lordship as the secure

fortress of meaning. Moreover, the hadith “May God have mercy upon the one who revives our cause” (rahīma Allāhu mra’an ahyā amranā), by emphasizing the learning and teaching of Divine teachings, is inferred as one of the most fundamental messages for the value of meaning and a flourishing life. Second, purposefulness, hope, and faith are shared as structural pillars of meaning in both perspectives. In positive psychology, hope is the driver of survival, and faith (in the general sense of belief in a higher purpose) is a vital element. This theme is clearly observed in the hadith “The best of servants” (khiyār al-‘ibād), which describes the characteristics of chosen servants, where purposefulness in action (gratitude and benevolence), hope in facing error (seeking forgiveness) and hardship (patience), and faith in God in controlling anger (forgiveness) are delineated as the pillars of a meaningful life. Likewise, the hadith “A servant does not perfect the reality of faith until...” (lā yastakmilu ‘abdun ḥaqīqata al-īmān ḥattā...), by outlining the triad of “understanding religion, excellence in managing one’s livelihood, and patience in calamities,” directly aligns with the components of meaning, purposefulness, and hope in the PERMA model.

The third and most significant point of convergence is the transformation of suffering into an opportunity for transcendence and growth. Frankl, by proposing the concept of “tragic optimism,” considers suffering a ground for meaning. Razavi teachings, with a more transcendent approach, introduce suffering and illness not as undesirable, but as a source of “purification and mercy” for the believer (hadith: “Illness for the believer is purification and mercy” - al-maraḍ lil-mu’min taṭhīr wa raḥmah), a sign of Divine love (“Whomever God loves, He afflicts him” - man aḥabba Allāhu ‘abdan ibtalāhu), and a path to attaining the station of “election and selection” (ijtibā’ wa iṣṭifā’). In this view, patience is not passivity but an active, selective, meaning-based resistance against hardships. These findings reveal that both approaches, beyond their differences in foundations (empirical humanism versus belief in revelation), possess the capacity for dialogue and mutual completion in responding to the existential needs of human beings to make suffering meaningful and achieve a flourishing life.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This comparative study concludes that positive psychology and Razavi teachings, despite fundamental differences in epistemological source and teleology, possess extraordinary complementary capacities for imbuing meaning into the life of

contemporary humanity. Positive psychology, by relying on empirical data, assessment tools, and a focus on worldly well-being and individual flourishing, offers useful operational structures but at times encounters limitations in explaining the meaning of profound suffering and the ultimate purpose of existence. In contrast, Razavi teachings, by grounding meaning in the existential bond between the human being and God, faith in the unseen, and the lofty goal of Divine proximity, provide a profound and comprehensive response to these limitations and offer a more coherent structure for meaning wherein even death and suffering become justifiable and transcendent.

Based on this, the article presents three strategic recommendations: first, the necessity of strengthening interdisciplinary dialogue between modern humanities and Islamic teachings to create an indigenous human science responsive to the cultural and spiritual needs of society. Second, utilizing the conceptual depth of Razavi teachings to enhance psychological understanding of meaning, particularly in challenging domains such as the meaning of suffering and death. Third, and most importantly, designing integrated mental and spiritual health programs based on the intelligent synthesis of the capacities of positive psychology (resilience, happiness, meaning-seeking) with Razavi wisdom (faith, trust in God, contentment, and otherworldly purposefulness)-an approach that can lead to the creation of a coherent, ethics-centered, and spiritual care system that targets both the psychological well-being and the spiritual and existential transcendence of the human being.

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, Meaning in Life, Razavi Teachings, Mental Health, Faith, Spirituality.