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Tabātabā'i: Theory of I'tibāriyyāt and His Political Philosophy

Acta Fakulty filozofické
Západočeské univerzity v Plzni /
West Bohemian Review of
Social Sciences & Humanities
2022, Vol. 14 (1), 21–36
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24132/actaff.2022.14.1.2
https://actaff.zcu.cz/
ISSN 2336-6346

Maryam Olamaiekopaie* , **Ehsan Arzroomchilar**

University of South Bohemia, Czech Republic

Abstract

Tabātabā'i is one of the greatest philosophers in the contemporary Islamic world. In this paper, his significant contribution to Islamic philosophy, namely the theory of i'tibāriyyāt, is discussed. He divides all knowledge into two categories; haqīqī, originating from the external world, and i'tibārī, constructed out of human needs. The latter kind of knowledge is unreal in the sense that it originates from the soul rather than from the world. Yet it is real in the sense that its effects are visible in the world. I'tibāriyyāt can be further classified into categories. More importantly, they are formulated in terms of either being formed before a society is established, i.e., pre-society i'tibāriyyāt, or being formed when there is already a society around, i.e., post-society i'tibāriyyāt. The following section of the paper presents the application of Tabātabā'i's theory in the context of his political philosophy. As we will explain, he seems to favour a religious regulating system when it comes to the content of laws. In contrast, he seems open to a non-religious form of political system insofar as he sympathizes with democracy.

Keywords

mental constructions, contemporary Islamic thought, i'tibāriyyāt, Tabātabā'i

Introduction

Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'i, also known as Allāmeh Tabātabā'i, is a leading Shi'i thinker who left a lasting footprint in the field of Islamic philosophy. As a polymath figure, his contribution covers a wide range of diverse branches of knowledge ranging from exegesis, philosophy, mysticism, jurisprudence and Islamic law to mathematics, astronomy, poetry, and literary. Expertise in so many disciplines coupled with his ascetic lifestyle and piety brought him legendary fame in Iran.

In philosophy, Tabātabā'i broadened the traditional scope of debate to include also human-related domains. He seems to be the first Muslim philosopher to take social constructions (which he treats under the banner of *i'tibāriyyāt*) into his philosophical considerations. Moreover, despite his deep immersion in the Muslim tradition, he was open also to Western thought, as his regular meetings with Henry Corbin, a contemporary French scholar, indicate. Similarly, like Ibn

* **Corresponding Author:** Maryam Olamaiekopaie, Depatment of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of South Bohemia, Kněžská 8, 370 01 České Budějovice, Czech Republic. E-mail: olamam00@tf.jcu.cz.

Sīnā, Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā and many other authors, Tabātabā'i creatively contributed to the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic tradition underlying much of Islamic thought.

The aim of this study is to bring some of Tabātabā'i's contributions to the fore. In doing so the present writing will focus first on his 'theory of i'tibāriyyāt',[1] referring to the distinction between that which truly is existent and that which is not, in order to deal philosophically with social entities, and second, on the implications of the theory on his political philosophy. He treated the topic in a wide range of works as we will explain, but most systematically in The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism (Uṣūl al-Falsafa va Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm).

The present paper is divided into five sections. The first section briefly summarizes Tabātabā'i's biography. In the second section, we present general discussions about the meaning and function of philosophy as sketched by Tabātabā'i. In the third section, we set out to elaborate Tabātabā'i's analysis of i'tibāriyyāt (mental constructions). In the fourth section his political remarks will be disclosed, and the last section is the conclusion.

Prologue

Born in a village near Tabriz in northwestern Iran, Allāmeh Muhammad Ḥusayn Tabātabā'i (1904–1981) is a towering Iranian scholar. He started his religious education in his hometown where he studied Arabic and Persian literature. In 1925 he moved to Najaf (a city in Iraq) to pursue an advanced level of his studies. Fiqh (Islamic laws), Islamic philosophy, mathematics and ethics were the subjects he studied in Najaf under some of the most illustrious Shi'i scholars "*including Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nā'inī (d. 1355/1936) who was known for his constitutionalism and his strong support for clerical authority*" (Rizvi, Bdaiwi 2016: 656). Returning to Iran and his hometown, Tabriz, he became a prominent figure in philosophy, theology, mysticism, and exegesis (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 9). Meanwhile, during the second World War, the Soviet Union invaded northern Iran and established a Marxist-oriented regime in Azerbaijan. This impelled Tabātabā'i to leave his home for Qom. By immigration to Qom a significant stage of his life and a turning point of contemporary Shi'i thought came about (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 9).

His main legacy is reviving the rational method of thinking and promoting a philosophical curriculum in Qom seminary (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 9). In Qom, he started teaching a number of major philosophical works including Shifā and Asfār, the seminal works of Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Ṣadrā respectively, to cover the main traditions of Islamic philosophy, namely Aristotelian and Ṣadrian philosophy (Nasr, Leaman 1996: 1847). Another influential step taken by Tabātabā'i was holding debate sessions with the intellectual figures in Tehran and Qom, which played an important role in promoting modern currents of thought in Iran. From 1958 to 1978 the French scholar Henry Corbin was a key figure participating in those gatherings.

In these meetings various philosophical topics were discussed from a comparative point of view and these discussions became the source of inspiration for a number of younger philosophers, including Morteza Motahari. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a current professor at the George Washington University, who studied both philosophy and 'irfān (Mysticism) with Tabātabā'i, was the main translator of these sessions in both linguistic and intellectual senses (Nasr, Leaman 1996: 1848).

Such a thought exchange between the Islamic tradition and the Western heritage was unprecedented since the Middle Ages (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 9). These sessions inspired Tabātabā'i to write one of his major works, Uṣūl al-Falsafa va Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism). His numerous works include also his magnum opus, al-Mīzān, the twenty-seven volume Qur'ānic commentary and two philosophical works, Bidāyat al-Ḥikma and

[1] One may translate the word roughly into mental constructions. In this writing I will use the both words interchangeably.

Nihāyat al-Ḥikma, which were penned with the purpose of clarifying the principles of Ṣadrian philosophy, namely *transcendental wisdom*, for students and young clergies.

In recent years some scholars have published writings about Tabātabā'i's works, ranging from his al-Mīzān to Nihāyat al-Ḥikma.[2] But so far, his novel contribution presented in Uṣūl al-Falsafa va Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm on i'tibāriyyāt has not been exposed to the Western intellectual world. Even though i'tibāriyyāt has proved to be one of his significant philosophical contributions it has remained largely unknown in the West. This might partially be due to the language of the book, namely Persian. In this paper we intend to bring his views on i'tibāriyyāt to the fore drawing mainly upon this book. We also occasionally draw on other publications in Persian, most importantly *Shī'a dar Islām*. By developing the theory of i'tibāriyyāt Tabātabā'i aimed to open a way to explore philosophically other dimensions of human life. We will lay bare his political perspective to show how his theory contributes to the concrete fields.

Allāmeh Tabātabā'i on the Definition of Philosophy

As human beings we have an innate disposition to discover the world through exploring things, phenomena, and their causes. It cannot happen appropriately, though, unless one already knows what is real and what just seems to be real. To meet this condition, one first needs to distinguish between real phenomena and mentally posited entities. This is the philosopher's mission to provide us with a litmus test to rule out the latter while preserving the former. So "*philosophy is a discipline of demonstrative arguments whose goal is to meet this condition along with proving the real existence of objects and also to identify their causes and their mode of existence.* [...] *All other disciplines, including experimental sciences, far from discussing 'being', hand it down to philosophy*" (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 1: 39-41). This definition is what Tabātabā'i offers in the first chapter of his multi-volume corpus, The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism (Uṣūl al-Falsafa va Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm), as the description of metaphysics (philosophy) and its goal. Metaphysics, according to him, has a quadruple characteristic.

1. Dealing with being as such or being qua being.
2. Demonstration and deductive reasoning as the method.
3. Exploring the causes of existence, notably the First Cause.
4. A novel distinction between that which is truly existent and that which is not (haqīqī/i'tibārī).

The last one is an unprecedented area of research which is deemed to be Tabātabā'i's major contribution to the Islamic metaphysics. Now we will go through each in turn. Provided the importance of the division of haqīqī/i'tibārī, the last one is going to be treated in a separate section.

Being qua Being

Tabātabā'i opens his philosophical discussion as follows: Every field of knowledge must have a subject matter. Numbers and animals, for instance, are subject matters of Mathematics and Zoology respectively. In the same way, being is the very subject of philosophy (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 15). In this sense, philosophy studies existence, different modes of existence and attributes of existence (Tabātabā'i 1388SH/2009AD: 15–16). As we can already identify and will see more clearly below, Tabātabā'i draws heavily on various Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements present in the Muslim tradition.

[2] One may refer to Rizvi, Bdaiwi (2016); Ehteshami, Rizvi (2016); Medoff (2007).

He sets two principles for the foundation of a realistic philosophical system:

1. The logical principle of non-contradiction.
2. The principle of the existence of an extra mental world[3] (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 26).

By the latter he attempts to demarcate an epistemological boundary to protect 'true philosophical arguments' from 'sophistic fallacies' (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 31). This principle is allegedly a departure point for depicting his whole metaphysical worldview.[4] Taking the second principle for granted, he gradually comes to demonstrate other Ṣadrian metaphysical doctrines such as the ontological primacy of existence,[5] modulation in existence,[6] substantive motion[7] and unity of being.[8] Below, we will go into details of the first two since they are relevant to the aim of this study.

He claims that human beings have an innate tendency to admit that there is an external world independent of the human mind. Having emphasized the existence of an extramental reality along with the human capacity to know it as it stands, Tabātabā'i embraces a naïve version of realism[9] (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 38).

He begins his philosophizing with the intuition that out of statements such as "the tree exists", "the sun exists" and "the human exists" one may abstract two distinct facets; concepts (taṣawwurāt) like 'tree', 'sun', 'human', on the one hand, and Being (wujūd) per se, on the other. Although concepts differ, they have a particular property in common, which is tantamount to their existence in the external world. It implies that existence is univocally predicated (mushtarak ma'nawī) of the entities.[10] He also points out that in statements like "God exists" and "this tree exists" the predicate of existence has the same meaning. Therefore, he refutes the view that existence is predicated equivocally (equivocity or mushtarak lafẓī) (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 43).

Simply put, when an object is conceived, two different features come to mind: The concept of Being (wujūd) and the concept of quiddity (māhiyya) (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3). This is what the Ṣadrian tradition calls 'disparity of existence and quiddity' (ziyādāt al-wujūd). As we will see, Tabātabā'i demonstrates the doctrine of the 'ontological primacy of existence' based on this precept.

It is worth mentioning that according to Tabātabā'i, both abovementioned tenets (the distinction between existence and quiddity on the one hand and the univocality of existence on the other) are innate intuitions bestowed on every human being. Put another way, all humans have an intuitive knowledge of these two and they must be, therefore, derived from the second principle (i.e., the independent existence of the world), which Tabātabā'i contends to be self-evident (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 38).

[3] In the Islamic tradition, an important pillar is believing in the existence of an extramental world, of which one may make sense the way it is. That is to say, it subscribes to naïve realism. So, while Tabātabā'i in this specific section does not use the term realism, there is sufficient evidence to justify using it. For instance, the title of Tabātabā'i's book, the phrase Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm, explicitly asserts that the view of the author is realistic.

[4] In this section I follow the structure of The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism (Uṣūl al-Falsafa va Ravish-i Ri'ālīzm), his major philosophical work written in Persian.

[5] The term is recommended by Rizvi in the Stanford Encyclopaedia under the entry of Mullā Ṣadrā.

[6] This term is a translation of tashkīk al-wujūd. Adamson lists several English translations for it, such as modulation, gradation, systematic ambiguity, and intensification (see Adamson 2018: 390).

[7] The translation of haraka jawhariyya by Fazlur Rahman see Rahman (1975: 112).

[8] I prefer this translation of waḥdat al-wujūd which is upheld by Sabine Schmidtke in The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy whereas Rizvi suggests 'Ontological Monism.'

[9] Naïve realism has been ascribed to Tabātabā'i (see Rizvi and Bidawi 2016: 660).

[10] Here Tabātabā'i's commentator, Morteza Motahari, explicitly quotes Aristotle's Metaphysics, book A.

As discussed earlier, each entity can be abstracted by our mind into two fundamental aspects; existence and quiddity. Since that which exists in the world is supposed to be one single unity, Tabātabā'i argues that only one of these two aspects (i.e., existence and quiddity) can be real, namely, actually present in the external world. It follows that while one of them is real the other one is a mental construction, i.e., i'tibārī (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 44). One aspect would have primacy or superiority over the other in this sense. What do we mean when we talk about a tree? Are we pointing to its quiddity or its existence? Which of these is the true content of the word 'tree'? Almost all philosophers prior to Mullā Ṣadrā tended to suppose that world consists of essence and in this way, they would prioritize quiddity. Mullā Ṣadrā is taken to be the first philosopher in the history of Islamic thought to assert the 'primacy' of existence (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 75). Tabātabā'i further, being a Ṣadrā's follower, subscribed to the latter's idea and assumes that existence has ascendancy over quiddity (aṣālat al-wujūd). According to Tabātabā'i, existence exists on its own, and actualization of existence in the external world takes place solely by itself, and not by virtue of something else, which is the case for essences (Rizvi, Bdaiwi 2016: 666).

By 'primacy' Tabātabā'i means that quiddity is a mental property (i.e., i'tibārī), while existence is a real extramental property (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 46). In other words, the referent of the word 'tree' in the external world is its existence, rather than its essence. Once a tree is reflected in the mind, we tend to believe that its quiddity is real as well, that is to say, there is something like a 'tree' independent of our mind out there. This, however, is false. Being tree, or the concept of 'treeness,' is our mind's construction. So, the appearance of quiddity is only in the mind and there is no such a thing in the extramental world. What is found in the external world is simply existence and importantly, in this sense, existence itself cannot be conceived directly by the mind (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 50). Human's mind is just able to identify things through creation of an essence ascribed to them, and the existence cannot be captured directly. 'Primacy of existence' (aṣālat al-wujūd) is one of the main doctrines of Islamic metaphysics after Mullā Ṣadrā to which also Tabātabā'i subscribes.

An implication of the 'primacy of existence' is the claim that differences between entities are due to their existence, rather than to their quiddity. This leads to a further doctrine of Ṣadrian metaphysical scheme, namely 'modulation in existence' (tashkīk al-wujūd) (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 56). If all that fills the world is existence, and not essence, a question would arise immediately; how is it possible for us to see a tree as tree and the sun as sun and they are not conflated? How is it possible to differentiate between objects, if they are nothing but existence, which is shared univocally by all? The answer lies in the doctrine of modulation. Following his predecessors, Tabātabā'i recourses to the metaphor of light[11] to provide a meaning for the doctrine. According to the symbolism of light, what the sun and a candle share is their nature of being light. However, they are distinguished by the degree to which they enjoy light; the sun enjoys a hefty level of luminosity, whereas a candle possesses a weak degree of luminosity. What differentiates them is not darkness or other factors, rather light itself. In fact, the very same thing that causes the similarity, namely luminosity, is also the source of the differentiation. Being luminous, therefore, is a matter of degree. The degree of possessing light would result in different entities. Likewise, the sole actual truth is existence, which is possessed in varying grades. Each grade is thought of as a mode of existence. Quiddity, in this sense, is nothing but these modes of existence. The core likeness of all entities is being qua being (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 56-58). In this way, Tabātabā'i following Mullā Ṣadrā, embraces the doctrine of modulation in existence.[12]

[11] The metaphor has been proven a longstanding analogy in Islamic thought. It goes back to Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191) and his famed major contribution, namely establishing the Illuminationist tradition.

The Demonstrative Method

Exploring the history of Islamic thought, Tabātabā'i enumerates three sources of knowledge; Qur'ān and hadīth (naql), philosophy and demonstration (burhān; i.e., 'aql), mysticism and unveiling (kashf). These methods are driven and inspired by the sole Islamic divine text, Qur'ān, according to him (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 39). In the first method, namely naql, the most exhaustive divine resources are Qur'ānic verses and Imams' sayings. They are uttered in a lucid and understandable way which can be comprehended by immediate audiences. Naql covers a wide range of discourses with detailed theoretical, ethical, and practical instructions, such as the true/valuable instruction of praying.

The second method, i.e., demonstrative argument, by contrast, does not aim to go through detailed teachings, rather serves only to provide general, permanent and immutable rules.

Mysticism offers as a third way, comprises a set of practices leading to the purification of the soul. Compared to other two methods, mysticism and kashf possess a more direct path. Tabātabā'i defines mysticism as "a God-given knowledge" bestowed to some special ascetics (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 41). Through rebuffing all carnal desires, a pious human comes to be absorbed by an incorporeal and sublime pleasure belonging to the immaterial world. From this point of view, unveiling is a privilege conferred on one by God, in contrast to rational thinking and naql which are in principle accessible to all.

Among these methods reason and philosophy for Tabātabā'i is of a central importance on two different grounds. Firstly, even though human beings have a connate inclination to discover the world by which they are surrounded, one's perception might misinterprets the external world. Therefore, a method by which humans can identify true knowledge would be in great demand (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 1: 37). So, the first role of demonstration and reasoning is to provide criteria for recognizing true beliefs from unreal ones and keeping one from making false judgments.

Another reason why rational and discursive philosophy is so important is that all sciences depend on it. In the first treatise Tabātabā'i thoroughly expounds how all sciences, including mathematics and empirical sciences, take the existence of their subject matters for granted before exploring their properties. In fact, these disciplines would be possible if the existence of the subject is already assumed. Therefore, philosophy is an endeavor to guarantee the existence of the subject matter of science, given that philosophy deals with being qua being (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 1: 40-44).

He highlights[13] two styles of reasoning, demonstration (burhān) and dialectic (jadal). A demonstrative argument is one whose premises are both real and true, whether all people agree or not. Human beings affirm these kinds of premises with the help of a God-given innate faculty according to him. The statement "Number 3 is less than 4" can be thought of as such a premise (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 49).

By contrast, dialectic is a method which makes use of premises (yet-to-be-proven) accepted by the members of a discipline. The history of religions is a source across which one may easily find such dialectical disputations (Tabātabā'i 1348SH/1969AD: 49).

[12]We leave the rest of principals of Ṣadrā's philosophy unexplained. In brief, substantive motion refers to the view that posits essence might undergo changes, contrary to what most philosophers claimed before Ṣadrā. Similarly, the principle of unity of being implies that only one existent exists, and in this sense the relation of God's existence and that of other entities is that of an absolute being and limited ones.

[13]This point is brought up in Shī'a dar Islām where Tabātabā'i lists three methodological frameworks in Shī'ī thought. This book provides well-structured principles of Shī'ī thought in Persian language for the first time. It has also been translated and edited by Hossein Nasr and regarded as the first English text introducing Tabātabā'i to Western academic society (for English translation, see Tabātabā'i 1975: 79).

Exploring Causes

Another mission of philosophy, based on Tabātabā'i's view, is exploring the cause of the world. As he writes: "*what philosophy denotes is that discovering the cause of the world has been the first and foremost concern of human beings*" (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 5: 162), "*One of the inquisitivenesses of philosophers is the question whether the existence of entities in the world is determined by their cause or not*" (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 173). Tabātabā'i then tries to refute the idea of the arbitrariness of creation (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 173). According to Tabātabā'i's commentator and his special disciple, Morteza Motahari, within the Islamic world, philosophical inquiry can be classified into four categories; 1. Issues which almost remained the same, as the main Hellenistic philosophical problems with probably some insignificant modifications, such as the four Aristotelian causes. 2. Issues initiated in the Hellenistic period and then completed throughout the Islamic period. For instance, the principle of infinite regress was introduced by Aristotle and he brought it up by an argument, but thereafter ten different arguments were provided by Fārābi, Ibn Sīnā, Mirdāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā. Immateriality of the soul is another example which took a different shape in the Islamic world. 3. Topics which have undergone substantial changes in the course of Islamic history and their purports started to be understood in diverging ways. This fact is mainly due to the original vagueness of such notions, such as the Platonic Ideas. 4. Finally, new and unprecedented philosophical problems such as substantial motion[14] (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 5: 26–32). In light of this formalization, the presentation of cause and effect, which Tabātabā'i provides in the ninth treatise in his collection of fourteenth treatises, echoes a traditional Aristotelian account. The significance of cause (specifically the first cause) in the Islamic world, according to him, lies in its identification with God (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 258–259).

Tabātabā'i characterizes the principle of causality as a self-evident truth which would be admitted by anyone immediately (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 126–128). Moreover, the possibility of science is germane to this principle, since what makes science possible is the alleged existence of causal relations between phenomena, such as the relation between water and heat which gives rise to steam. Put simply, if one pushes a door and the door does not open, one will investigate then to find the obstacles, because one assumes pushing the door should necessarily make the door open. Therefore, a cause makes an effect necessarily exist. In other words, an effect comes into existence due to the necessity loaded into it by a cause. As a result, any effect needs to a cause to be brought about (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 126–128). Following Ibn Sīnā, Tabātabā'i brings the same argument to prove the necessity of First Cause and identifying it with the Necessary Being, namely God. The argument goes as follow:

He argues that nothing comes into existence unless it already possesses a necessity. Every existing entity in the extramental world is predicated necessity. On the other hand, the necessity of an effect is inherited from its cause. Every cause (in turn, as an effect) inherits necessity from an antecedent cause. Since an infinite regress is impossible, the chain of causes must ultimately lead to an intrinsic necessity, namely Necessary Being (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 3: 147–149). Tabātabā'i associates God with the Necessary Being and devotes the last treatise of his corpus to delving extensively into God's attributes.

[14] "*Earlier Islamic philosophers, especially Ibn Sīnā, had followed Aristotelian natural philosophy in accepting motion (al-harakah) only in the categories of quantity (kamm), quality (kayf), situation (wad') and place (ayn), all of which are accidents, and denied explicitly the possibility of motion in the category of substance. Mullā Ṣadrā opposed this thesis directly by saying that any change in the accidents of an object requires in fact a change in its substance since accidents have no existence independent of substance*" (Nasr, Leaman 1996: 1148–1149).

Tabātabā'i and Mental Constructions

As noted earlier, Tabātabā'i initiates philosophizing on the division between truths and mental constructions. He takes this as a constituent of philosophical inquiry. Crucially, the division has both methodologic and ontological implications. It paves the way, in fact, to bringing many further disciplines to be studied philosophically. The demarcation of haqīqī/i'tibārī is meant to divide knowledge into two distinct categories: ethics, social and political science (i.e., human related science) on the one hand, and unchangeable domains like logic and metaphysics on the other. The thread linking them is their capacity to be studied philosophically. Therefore, one of Tabātabā'i's significant achievements is integrating human-dependent knowledge into philosophy, next to the latter's inherent vision, which is studying existence. Consequently, he starts dealing with the realm of human affairs with the help of mentally posited constructs. Moreover, ontologically speaking, Tabātabā'i introduces a new kind of objectivity, in the form of i'tibāriyyāt, which is located somewhere between, in a way, the objective realm and the subjective one. It means that i'tibāriyyāt, while mentally constructed, have influences in the real world.

To explicate the notion of i'tibāriyyāt it seems necessary first to lay bare the starting point of Tabātabā'i. While elaborating the nature of the realm of human affairs and its characteristics, he is predominantly concerned with describing human free actions. He launches the inquiry by investigating the general features shared by humans and non-humans. However, along the way, a distinguishing characteristic is also ascribed to human beings, namely, the faculty of creating i'tibāriyyāt.

The Nature of I'tibāriyyāt

Tabātabā'i introduces the term i'tibār in one of his early works titled Risāla al-I'tibāriyyāt.[15] The word 'i'tibār' is derived from the Arabic words 'ubūr' and 'abara' which mean 'to pass, to go through.' When one uses i'tibāriyyāt it means that one is passing through the first meaning of a word to get to another semantic layer. In other words, it implies seeing some particular phenomenon and going beyond its outward appearance to identify it as another one. Take, for instance, his own example, a painting. How is it possible to see the sun, a tree or the sea on the canvas while there is nothing on it except shades of colors and the light reflection? Tabātabā'i holds that our mind has a capacity of seeing something as something else. It is the precise definition of the word i'tibār which in this sense we may translate as 'mental construction.'[16] Our mind identifies the composition of colors on the canvas with sun, tree and sea and thereby beyond the former it sees the latter picture.

Tabātabā'i's views have root in an anthropology and epistemology drawing on Mullā Ṣadrā's and Ibn Sīnā's ideas on the one hand and inspired in many ways by Aristotle and later traditions of ancient thought on the other.

I'tibāriyyāt; Elaboration

In Tabātabā'i's view, all the free actions of a human being boil down to her basic physical needs and her striving to satisfy them, like looking for food in case of a hungry person. In addition, a human being is comprised of two substances; the physical body and the soul. She must constantly try to meet her needs. But this process would be possible only by the management of the non-

[15]The first usage of the term 'i'tibār' is rooted in a philological analysis of metaphors, which will be explained in this section.

[16]Peter Adamson translates this category "conventional," but it seems that convention only conveys the meaning of post-society i'tibāriyyāt and not the pre-society one, as I will discuss in further sections (Adamson 2018: 445).

physical part of her structure, namely the soul. Soul in turn entails 'will' and 'thought.' In other words, the soul sets up human faculties to be able to create i'tibāriyyāt.

When one becomes hungry, for instance, her soul needs to satisfy the hunger. In doing so, the soul starts first to imagine a state of being satiated and then in the next step she goes after food to realize her imagination. The soul of human learns that if it does not create the notion of necessity to link between her hunger and the state of being satiated, nothing will come about, and she will suffer. This necessity is not of the kind that is associated with the laws of nature; rather it is based on the agent's will (Kiashemshaki 1396HS/2017AD: 113). Necessity in this sense refers to a condition where human being learns that in order to meet her needs she must do something.

The realm of i'tibāriyyāt, which we inhabit, is so vast and encompasses all our knowledge. It turns out that it has an affinity with both the subjective and the objective realms, but differs from both in certain aspects. It is not merely subjective, as it coincides with the real external world and has actual effects and consequences. Nor is it merely objective, because it results from the creation of human agents and is thus mind-dependent in this sense.

Types of I'tibāriyyāt

All the free actions of a human being are based on her various desires and wishes, according to Tabātabā'i (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 185). When we take a free action, it must have been preceded by a specific desire to motivate the process of recognizing the true object of our needs. Hence, at first, the soul has to create a relation of necessity between itself and the desirable object O to produce an act A. Moreover, since our desires fall into two categories, namely permanent desires and temporary (mutable) ones, i'tibāriyyāt would be divided into two kinds accordingly; permanent i'tibāriyyāt and temporary (mutable) ones (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 200). For example, the interior design of my house might seem beautiful to me today but not so tomorrow. But the very i'tibār of beauty persists. From this, we may draw several insights; first of all, the notion of 'beauty' is not real, rather it is our mental construction. Second, it seems to be permanent, that is, our need for beauty is sustained across time and space. Third, the object of beauty, that is, 'the beautiful,' is not sustained necessarily across time and space, rather it changes along with our provisional needs.

Further, from another perspective, i'tibāriyyāt can be divided into two categories; some are independent of any society (e.g., drinking water), whereas others have their roots in society (e.g., marriage).

From this it follows that permanent i'tibāriyyāt can be divided into two subcategories: pre-society i'tibāriyyāt and post-society ones (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 202). The latter are called post-society in the sense that they are embedded in a human community by virtue of human convention.

According to Tabātabā'i, pre-society i'tibāriyyāt are prerequisites and preconditions of all human free actions (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 213). The most important pre-society i'tibāriyyāt are as follows: necessity, goodness and evil, differentiation of the more and less difficult, utilization, and realism in knowledge (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 213). In what follows we first briefly discuss pre-society i'tibāriyyāt and then post-society i'tibāriyyāt will be explained.

Pre-society I'tibāriyyāt

Necessity

As stated above, first our desires are directed to an external object or state of affairs O and then, in the next step, a necessity relation is formed between us and them leading to taking action. Therefore, one is not able to take a free action without shaping this necessity linkage.

Goodness and Evil
It is also not possible to take an action without assuming its goodness. We consider our actions good because we find them pleasant given that they fit our requirements. Otherwise we call them bad. In fact, we would never take any action if we did not think of it as pleasant. So good and bad do not exist as independent of our mind, rather they make sense in terms of our considerations. We are the ones who create good and evil in line with our needs and their satisfaction. This means that, apparently, Tabātabā'i is opposing all those schools of ethics that in one way or another appeal to an independent realm of ethical propositions, namely moral realism. It is worth mentioning that this distinction (goodness/evil) is conceived broader than its moral sense because it comes from acknowledging necessity; in this way we find out what is good for us, and what we should avoid. As with the case of necessity, the principle of goodness and evil is self-evident and absolute, even though the value we attach to particular good or bad things is arbitrary or at least dependent on species, e.g., bitterness is bad for humans but might be good for some other species.

Differentiation of the More and Less Difficult
Imagine two alternative actions, both of which will result in realizing our needs, just with the difference that getting to our goal is easier through one of them. We normally would choose that for the simple reason that it requires less effort. This preference for the easy over the difficult is one of the pre-society i'tibāriyyāt, according to Tabātabā'i.

Utilization
Fourth is the principle of *social life* for self-preservation and utilizing others for one's own benefit. It is a fairly clear intuition that every animal utilizes the environment, nature, and other animals around to struggle for its existence. But there is an important difference between humans and animals regarding this principle. Human beings exercise the faculty not only for realizing their immediate biological needs, but also for more advanced desires. They cultivate plants in homes, for instance, to make their houses more pleasant, even though it is not paramount to their survival. Crucially, the list of the things humans deploy to improve the quality of their lives goes far afield to the extent that they exploit also other *humans*. In fact, such an attitude towards things and humans is not a perversion or an abnormality at all, as Tabātabā'i notes, because it follows from the very human nature. Consequently, through exercising the i'tibār of utilization, every person utilizes all the things accessible in the surrounding. It is also worth mentioning that, should there be no i'tibār of utilization, no society would be brought into existence at all, as we shall see later. In sum, according to the i'tibār of utilization, in a human community, everybody's needs would be satisfied by other members – humans as well as non-humans.

Post-society I'tibāriyyāt

Possession, language, and headship are the most important post-society i'tibāriyyāt listed by Tabātabā'i. These notions are not imaginable without the assumption of an already existing human society. In this sense they are social affairs. According to Tabātabā'i, the human faculties will lead a human being to perfection through the satisfaction of her immediate goals; a state one can reach only through creating these types of i'tibāriyyāt. On the other hand, since some human needs change over time and improve as society becomes more developed, i'tibāriyyāt need to be adapted to this new arrangement of the society. It means that across time a substantive transformation of i'tibāriyyāt is required, both qualitatively and quantitatively. For example, in the past it was prevalent to exchange goods and services directly for other goods and services. Gradually, difficulties gave rise to the emergence and development of money. Later, forms of trade

developed into more advanced modes, such as inventing coins, paper money, and more recently credit cards and even cryptocurrencies. In fact, our ancestors first created the relevant i'tibāriyyāt to meet their specific needs, but gradually these i'tibāriyyāt were transformed into more intricate ones through extensive historical and cultural alterations. We may also create i'tibāriyyāt such as government, economy, and law to meet our social demands. In other words, our social needs determine the meaning and shape of post-society i'tibāriyyāt. For example, a piece of paper is considered money only in the context of a society (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 218), and only within a society a bunch of papers as ballots embody an election.

Before discussing some of the post-society i'tibāriyyāt, a point needs to be made. From the discussion above one can extract three characteristics associated with i'tibāriyyāt:

Real Effects and Consequences

Post-society i'tibāriyyāt indicate how social life, law, and ethics gradually emerged. As mentioned earlier, although i'tibāriyyāt are our mind's creations – and in this sense subjective – their impact goes far beyond the subjective life and affects the external world. This is the case with both post-society i'tibāriyyāt and pre-society ones. Headship, for instance, as an i'tibārī notion means commanding somebody in the actual world although it has not originated from the world. Likewise, possession generates real effects, such as occupying or grabbing some actual things, despite being constructed in the mind.

Truth or Falsity

Even though i'tibāriyyāt do not represent anything in the world, yet Tabātabā'i holds it is meaningful to talk about the truth or falsity of i'tibāriyyāt. However, they do not comply with the 'correspondence theory of truth,' which is relevant within the natural sciences. Rather, the truth of a particular i'tibār is based on satisfying our needs; the needs for which they have been created at their inception. If they are able to meet our needs, they are true, otherwise they are false in this sense. The truth of i'tibāriyyāt, according to Tabātabā'i, is therefore a matter of praxis, rather than correspondence with something external.

Changes of Post-society I'tibāriyyāt

Since our desires can be divided into two categories, namely permanent desires and temporary (mutable) ones, as noted above, i'tibāriyyāt are of two kinds, too; permanent i'tibāriyyāt and temporary (mutable) ones. In Tabātabā'i's view, for example, while the concepts of good and bad are permanent, the extensions of good and bad are fluid. It is worth mentioning that this reading of ethics has been criticized by some of his successors on the ground that it leads to ethical relativism (Kashi Zadeh 1396HS/2017AD: 225). But going into the details in this respect is beyond the purview of this paper.

Post-society i'tibāriyyāt in this sense emerge out of social interactions in a particular segment of time and space, they are fluid and subject to change according to the society's priorities.

Below we discuss briefly some post-society i'tibāriyyāt.

Possession

It is the most significant i'tibār which occurs when someone owns something. Money, trade, marriage, friendship, and all rights of ownership are various types of possession. All of them can be called rights in the modern sense. As elaborated, even though they are not real in terms of having stemmed from the world, they have real impacts.

Language
Language is another type of post-society i'tibāriyyāt. All society members, including animals, need a common language to communicate with each other and convey their meaning and purpose. Generally, it seems that at the first stage of development an animal transmits a voice to imply an action, for example, feeding her baby. Then that particular voice comes to be associated with that specific meaning through repetition. Gradually, once the baby hears the voice, he grasps the meaning right away and no longer pays any attention to the voice per se. Depending on new occasions, newly emerging needs, and also on the principle of 'choosing the easiest way,' society creates new words and improves its language.

Headship
Headship is another type of post-society i'tibāriyyāt, which is rooted in a pre-society i'tibār, namely utilization. This i'tibār has developed in the fabric of society and generally forms the relationships between different groups of social members. According to this i'tibār, the strong members of society who have especially physical superiority over others can easily use other individuals, either animals or humans, in their interest.

I'tibāriyyāt; laying out a political philosophy

The theory of i'tibāriyyāt has a great potential to extend Islamic philosophy to the terrains upon which no Muslim philosopher has ever touched. Even though Tabātabā'i himself did not manage to examine all implications of his theory, he occasionally tried some of them. In this section, we aim to explore one of these arenas; the application of i'tibāriyyāt on political philosophy. Tabātabā'i's ideas on politics are notoriously fragmentary and one must delve deeply into his discrete works to mine his position. Here, drawing upon his several writings including Risāla al-Walāya, al-Mīzān and Uṣūl al-Falsafa, we will try to formulate his view. As said, his point of departure is the theory of i'tibāriyyāt, out of which one i'tibār has an integral role within his political discussions, namely the i'tibār of utilization.

In the foregoing we have elaborated his outlook on how humans create society based on the fact that individuals, to cope with their own needs, develop reciprocal relationships with others. It was also noted that the underlying motive for such relations is the i'tibār of Utilization. Utilization, in this sense, occurs where individuals approach fellows to satisfy their own needs. Along this way they will soon feel that they have to satisfy also their fellows' needs, otherwise their own desires would remain unsatisfied. In this respect then all individuals start exchanging costs and benefits reciprocally. Such interactions gradually give rise to emergence of a primitive community. In such a society needs of all members would be met along with each other's. Emerging human society, therefore, is a consequence of the utilization i'tibār (Tabātabā'i 1391SH/2012AD v. 2: 208).

A caveat however is that although humans are social beings they are not inherently so, according to Tabātabā'i. Human beings brought about societies simply because they had to (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD: 176). Nothing social is inherent to the nature of humanity per se, in this view. Rather what is rooted in the human nature is only the disposition of exploiting the surroundings (i.e., i'tibār of utilization), and constructing societies, in this sense, comes to be only a secondary concern for human. This seems like a novel and unprecedented description of human nature, for prior Islamic philosophers tended to ascribe an intrinsic sociability to human being.

Now, given that all humans are in bilateral relationships, in order for a society to withstand the potential conflicts, the needs of other members too must be considered as important as one's own. Here is a crucial moment then when the idea of *equality* comes into play. Everybody has to seek for equal conditions and stablishing just interactions; otherwise, in the long run, she might perish or

become annihilated (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v.2: 176). Tabātabā'i, not only denounces any kind of one-way exploitation (i.e., utilization without equality), but, interestingly, traces the roots of idolatry and heresy back to such an imbalanced utilization (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v.2: 92), as we will explain shortly. This way, Tabātabā'i grounds the social life and justice ultimately on the internal demands of human individuals, that is, the desire to survive. His political view departs from such an anthropology.

Now, even though individuals have to admit others' right, in virtue of their own desire to survive, such an admission does not *guarantee*, in practice, the right of all members. The next query therefore is how to insure the interests of all civilians. Obviously law enforcement would be required to cope with the likely future social conflicts.[17] The first and foremost duty of a political system then, according to Tabātabā'i, is realizing justice and obliterating cruelty. This step is further required for the final perfection of individuals (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 2: 92, v. 3: 145, v. 4: 121–124). But what kind of political setting has the potential to undertake this mission? Or alternatively, what kind of politics is favored by Tabātabā'i?

Tyranny is immediately ruled out by Tabātabā'i, for it is based merely on one-way relationships (i.e., exploitation), rather than a fair reciprocal arrangement (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v.16: 192). In fact, as he observes, religion was emerged to eradicate any relic of such one-way exploitations, which in politics manifests itself as a dictatorship (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 12: 293). Tyranny is the exemplar of an idolatry, as a person, standing in power, takes advantage of all civilians, in an entirely one-way relationship. A dictator in this sense tends to sit on a divinely throne and rule the society without respecting civilians' rights. This is exactly the kind of idolatry against which the prophet was fighting, Tabātabā'i argues.

However, this observation, does not lend itself to a secular democracy. Tabātabā'i, as a cleric, is not willing to appeal merely to human-made laws either. Even though he admits the role of reason as a major source of inspiration in organizing societal policies (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 12: 330), he stresses the role of religion in regulating a society. Religious decrees, can, or rather should, play a guiding role in the society, he believes (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 12: 293).

But how a religious regulating system diverges from a secular democracy? Democracy, unlike a religious system, does not contribute to the cultivation of morals and virtues. Neither does it care about human nature, he argues. Rather it is exclusively concerned with the *outward* societal behavior of civilians (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 2: 119, 151). Religious laws, promulgated by prophets, in contrast, regulate human life in its entirety, and not just public aspect of it. Religion, moreover, ensures that humanity keeps up the moderation path, without going towards either extreme, that is to say, a religious system of regulation secures humanity against both overindulgence and asceticism.[18] Therefore, religion offers the most perfect laws for guiding society.

This intuition, Tabātabā'i notes, may serve, furthermore, as a sociological argument for Prophethood (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 3: 58-59). Again, religion in general and Prophets' mission in particular, as one can see, is taken to be rooted in intrinsic human needs and innate faculties.[19] "*What can be realized by a sincere reflection is that religion has demonstrated and explained the teachings related to the origin and the laws, as well as the ones associated with what comes after this worldly mode of existence – all of that is explained in the language of mental constructions*" (Tabātabā'ī 1407AH/1987AD: 13).

[17] As Tabātabā'i observes, Human behavior in the process of social interactions are different. Some are more considerate and some selfish. Therefore, there appears disparities as inequality and injustice. Furthermore, people naturally differ in their moral conduct, as well as in terms of maintaining balance between what is allowed and what one ought to do. The imperative of social justice creates the need to establish laws.

[18] It seems Tabātabā'i, as an Aristotelian philosopher, is inspired by the 'golden mean'.

[19] In fact, Tabātabā'ī is lavish in granting self-evidence and innate (fiṭrī) not only to simple conceptions but also to complex judgements.

As Tabātabā'i notices, to mitigate injustice and selfishness, society needs reason and laws for guiding civilians' actions. For the laws to be flawless and fair, the lawgivers must consider the entirety of the human life, that is, its reality, origin and the end. Only religion suggests a holistic solution to such a need (Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 16: 195–199). Put simply, religion is the only legitimate source to posit what kind of laws are in compliance with fiṭra (innate). Among all religions, importantly, Islam is the natural religion because it bases the path of realization of people's servitude to God on the very nature of human beings, and in this sense, Islam is in harmony with the human soul.

Before ending the illustration of Tabātabā'i's outlook, we need to clarify two potential cases of conflict within Tabātabā'i's articulation of politics. The first one is his seemingly conflicting statements concerning his favored political system. On the one hand he emphasizes the inevitable role of religion in politics, as said, and on the other hand he never refers to the notion of a "religious politics". On the contrary, he takes politics to be the domain of 'human' *reason* and 'societal' affair, rather than that of religion (e.g., see Tabātabā'i 1374SH/1995AD v. 2: 122–125, v. 3: 48, v. 4: 124, v. 12: 330). How such a conflict might be dissolved?

One possible way around it, we propose, is the insight that, religion, according to Tabātabā'i, cannot be concerned with the *form* of a political system. Rather it only matters when it comes to the content of the politics, namely, the laws which are going to be enacted. In this sense, Muslims can think about any imaginable political structure which resonates with reason. But, where religion has a say, civilians cannot pass laws which are inconsistent with the religion, even when the majority affirms new laws. There are some red lines in passing laws, as it were, which Muslims should not violate, and here lies where a religious politics diverges from a secular one. Even though Tabātabā'i is not explicit to distinguish *form* of a political system from its *content*, yet our suggestion may well align with his general view. At least such a proposal may provide a preliminary way to accommodate the aforementioned conflict.

The second conflict arising from his views pertains to the two different tendencies, which both, according to Tabātabā'i, spring from human innate (fiṭra). On the one hand fiṭra is taken to be the major drive for the exploitation of others as much as possible. On the other hand, however, the very same fiṭra prompts human beings to be fair to others, through abiding by the Islamic decrees. How this collision could be dissolved?

Such a conflict should not disturb one, as Tabātabā'i notes. Religion has the power to tame and modify other innate propensities. In this sense, religion, not only helps people ascent the path of perfection of the soul, but it also regulates the (possible) tensions of the inner forces. Human beings have such a propensity to take advantage of others as much as possible in their benefit which is clearly unfair. Yet at the very same time they have also the tendency to submit to the God's decrees, which call them into fair relationships.

The preceding overview provides a brief report of how Tabātabā'i is trying to build a religious political establishment on the ground of his i'tibāriyyāt theory. The departure point, as elaborated, is an analysis of human's innate faculties (fiṭra). Tabātabā'ī posits Islam as a religion that has truly grounded its practical and social facets on fiṭra, and its practical teachings on human essential needs. It is the path that maximizes human happiness (Tabātabā'ī 1374SH/1995AD v. 3: 67)[20] and such a religion is therefore best fitted to the eudaemonistic objective of the human life.

[20]For more debates on happiness see his explanation in Tabātabā'i (1374SH/1995AD v. 3: 7–9).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study started with an analysis of the meaning of philosophy in Tabātabā'i and its implications. Throughout the history of Islamic philosophy, the subject matter of philosophy has been identified with the study of being, and in this sense, Tabātabā'i is no exception. However, Tabātabā'i takes one step further by drawing a distinction between that which is truly existent and that which only is mentally constructed (haqīqī/i'tibārī). The division turned out to be his major contribution to Islamic philosophy.

He starts, as many other metaphysicians do, by discussing being qua being and its attributes. Nonetheless, he later came to realize that other scopes of intellectual thinking, such as epistemology, social philosophy, or ethics, had remained highly underdeveloped.[21] Initiating a new field of inspection, namely mentally posited concepts, he therefore set up a theoretical framework to investigate ethics, politics, and social philosophy. It was arguably the first systematic attempt to study the ontology of social entities in the history of Islamic philosophy. From this point of view, Tabātabā'i's legacy is to expand the scope of philosophy within the Ṣadrian tradition and to provide a more comprehensive analysis of what has been called metaphysics (Fanaie Eshkevari 1390HS/2011AD).

In this article we further set out to explore the implications of his theory in the domain of politics. As said, he seems to be seeking a religious ruling when it comes to the content of a political system, that is, laws and how things are going to be handled. But as far as the form of a political structure is concerned, he would not take issue with a democratic system. The latter holds true even though the range of law enforcement within a Muslim society is not as wide as a secular democracy, because of the fact that its content, emphatically, cannot be anything apposing religious principles.

Given the notorious ambiguity of his writings, as well as the language by which i'tibāriyyāt are developed, i.e., Persian, it is not surprising that Tabātabā'i's contribution has remained unknown to English-speaking audiences so far. We hope this work will expose the contemporary Iranian thought and will motivate other scholars to explore the successors of Mullā Ṣadrā in more details.

Funding

Maryam Olamaiekopaie's part is a partial output of the project GAJU (Registration No.:100/2020/H) funded by the University of South Bohemia.

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[21] Abolhasan Sha'rani (1903–1974) was the first scholar in seminary who touches upon modern European philosophy and represented a brief report of history of philosophy from Pre-Socratic philosophers to Kant (for more on this, see Sha'rani 1373SH/1994AD: 33–73).

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About authors

Maryam Olamaiekopaie is a PhD student at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of South Bohemia. Her research interest focuses philosophy in the Islamic world, especially later period and contemporary tradition. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4219-1258.

Ehsan Arzroomchilar is a PhD student at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of South Bohemia. His research interest focuses ethics of technology, specially in an Islamic context. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6642-4365.