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A New Research Philosophy for a New Global Hegemony: Part 1

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Abstract. This article examines the philosophical system of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and its implications for social research methodology. Rooted in the Transcendent Philosophy of Mulla Sadra, Motahhari's framework integrates ontology and epistemology through the principles of graded existence and multi-sourced knowledge, encompassing sense perception, reason, and spiritual purification. His thoughts offer a robust critique of materialism, subjective idealism, and value-neutral positivism, emphasizing instead a realist, value-laden, and multi-dimensional approach to understanding human and social reality. This article proposes a "Transcendent Realist Paradigm" (TRP) derived from Motahhari's principles, characterized by multi-layered analysis, transcendent interpretation, and the integration of empirical, rational, and spiritual knowledge sources. This paradigm rejects reductionistic and one-dimensional conceptions of human nature and social change, offering instead a comprehensive framework for social inquiry that is intellectually rigorous, morally grounded, and oriented toward human flourishing and alignment with divine purpose.

Keywords: Transcendent Realist Paradigm, Transcendent Philosophy, Ontology, Epistemology, Motahhari's Philosophical System.

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari: A Comprehensive Philosophical Framework for Social Inquiry

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (1920-1979) was an influential Iranian philosopher and a central figure in the modern Islamic intellectual resurgence. His philosophical approach reflects a nuanced attempt to reconcile traditional Islamic thought with the urgent concerns of the contemporary age, frequently entering into critical dialogue with Western philosophical traditions. To appreciate the full scope of his contribution, and particularly its implications for social research methodology, it is necessary to examine the foundational elements of his system, from ontology and epistemology to his critique of modernity and his vision of human nature. Only then can we grasp how his thought gives rise to a distinct paradigm for social inquiry.

The Foundation: Transcendent Philosophy

Motahhari emerged as a modern exponent of the school of *al-hikma al-mutaaliyaya* or Transcendent Philosophy, founded in the seventeenth century by Mulla Sadra (Chawoshi et al., 2023; Parsania et al., 2015; Tamimi & Pourhasan, 2026). This philosophical traditions rests upon two core tenets, the "principality of existence" (*asalat al-wujud*) and the "gradational unity of being" (*tashkik al-wujud*) (Fathi, 2025; Ghafoori Nejad, 2007; Mehdi et al., 2024), which together constitutes the philosophical bedrock of Motahhari's own system (Mehdi et al., 2024). Drawing upon this framework, he offered reasoned accounts of intricate theological questions, including the enduring problem of evil (Mehdi et al., 2024; Miqdad, 2023).

From this ontological foundation, Motahhari proceeded to address two perennial philosophical challenges: the reconciliation of causality with human freedom, and the justification of evil within a divinely ordered cosmos. These concerns are not merely abstract; they directly inform his borader vision of human agency and moral responsibility.

Reconciling Causality with Freedom

A central tension in Motahhari's philosophical system lies in reconciling a universe ordered by causal necessary with undeniable human experience of freedom and moral accountability (Masoudi, 2024; Rastegar Moghadam Ebrahimian, 2025; Tamimi & Pourhasan, 2026). While Motahhari firmly upheld the principle of universal causality, he equally insisted on the reality of human agency (Mutahhari, 2011; Tamimi & Pourhasan, 2026). His resolution to this apparent paradox is both subtle and innovative: he distinguishes between two dimensions of human action- the material aspect (external, observable behavior), and the form, or *intentionality*, which constitutes the agent's inner purpose, awareness, and voluntary choice (Motahhari, 1954; Mutahhari, 1992; Tamimi & Pourhasan, 2026). For Motahhari, it is this intentional dimension that serves as the essential condition for freedom. By grounding moral responsibility in

intentionality rather than in the mere mechanical occurrence of an act, he is able to affirm both the causal integrity of the natural world and the genuine autonomy of the human subject. In this way, Motahhari preserves a robust conception of moral agency without resorting to a metaphysical indeterminism that would violate the rational coherence of a causally ordered universe (Mutahhari, 1992; Tamimi & Pourhasan, 2026).

The Problem of Evil and the "Best Possible System"

Motahhari's commitment to a rationally coherent theodicy is equally evident in his treatment of the problem of evil, which he addressed across dimensions: the logical, the evidential, and the existential (or gratuitous) (Mehdi et al., 2024). His solution drew from the Quran and medieval Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and Mulla Sadra (Miqdad, 2023). He argued that evil is "nonexistent" or the "lack of goodness", a privation rather than a positive entity (Baqershahi, 2011; Mehdi et al., 2024; Miqdad, 2023). He further contended that instances of evil are relative in nature, emphasizing the importance of viewing the world holistically (Miqdad, 2023). Ultimately, he justified evil within the framework of the "wisdom of the best possible system" (*nizam al-ahsan*), arguing that suffering and imperfection play a necessary role in the development of human soul (Baqershahi; 2011; Mehdi et al., 2024; Miqdad, 2023; Mutahhari, 1992).

Having established these metaphysical foundations, Motahhari extended his philosophical vision to encompass a comprehensive account of human nature, society, and the challenges of modernity.

A Comprehensive and Integrated View of Humanity and Society

Motahhari's philosophy was not confined to abstract speculation; it is extended to a wide range of practical and social issues, offering a cohesive vision that integrates the individual, the social, and the transcendent.

Human Nature and Freedom

Motahhari conceptualized human freedom as comprising two interrelated dimensions: social freedom, understood as liberation from exploitation by others, and spiritual freedom, defined as emancipation from base carnal desires. He maintained that authentic social freedom is unattainable without prior spiritual liberation, which itself requires rigorous self-purification (Asadi far et l., 2023; Karimi & Limba, 2008). For Motahhari, the true human self is a God-inspired, angelic entity, and the individual's ethical obligation is to subdue the animalistic self through the cultivation of will and rational discipline (Shimamoto, 2008). Consequently, human freedom is fundamentally rooted in religious consciousness and must be exercised within the bounds of divine will (Zaeribasir et al., 2024; Yousefi et al., 2015).

Critique of Modernity

Motahhari diagnosed a range of modern afflictions (including mental disorders, youth alienation, nihilism, and environmental degradation) as symptoms of a deeper "disease of civilization," rooted in a fractured relationship with the divine (Shimamoto, 2008). However, he did not call for an outright rejection of modernity; rather, he endeavored to offer both religious and rational responses to its practical and intellectual challenges (Jokar & Hasannia, 2023).

Critique of Western Ideologies

Motahhari was a formidable critic of Western ideological frameworks, particularly liberal humanism and atheistic existentialism (Alavitabar, 2024; Yousefi, 2015). He took issue with liberalism's excessive focus on individualism and its perceived disconnection from divine guidance (Yousefi, 2015). He also vehemently rejected Sartre's atheistic existentialism, which denied any fixed human essence and posited an irreconcilable conflict between divine existence and human freedom (Alavitabar, 2024; Ketabi et al., 2020). In contrast, Motahhari maintained that Islam- drawing upon the integrated resources of reason, revelation, and spiritual intuition- offers a more comprehensive and authentic vision of human nature and flourishing (Yousefi, 2015).

A Holistic Approach to Knowledge

A recurring theme in Motahhari's thought is his critique of intellectual schools that absolutize a single dimension of truth, attempting to reduce all phenomena to that narrow framework and thereby yielding an impoverished understanding (Kohanhooshnejad & Pakzat, 2025). Against this reductionism, he championed a comprehensive, multi-dimensional methodology- one that integrates diverse perspectives when approaching complex domains such as ethics, economics, and human nature (n.a., 2024; Syamsuri, 2024). This integrative approach, rooted in a holistic vision of reality, renders his philosophy particularly relevant for addressing the multifaceted challenges of the modern world.

At its core, Motahhari's philosophy constitutes a dynamic and coherent system that deploys the conceptual resources of traditional Islamic philosophy to mount a rigorous defense of religion in the face of modern intellectual challenges, while simultaneously providing a practical framework for both personal and social organization.

Ontology and Epistemology: An Integrated Vision

Building upon the foregoing discussion of Ayatollah Motahhari's comprehensive philosophical system, it can be argued that his unique approach directly addresses the intertwined questions of ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the nature and scope of knowledge). For Motahhari, these are not separate fields but are fundamentally

connected, with his ontological commitments providing the framework for a robust theory of knowledge.

Ontology: A Foundation of Graded Reality

Motahhari's ontological framework draws from the school of Transcendent philosophy, a tradition he vigorously defended in opposition to both materialist and idealist worldviews (Hesamifar, 2011; Mehdi et al., 2024). His view rests on these key principles:

The Primacy of Existence (Asalat al-Wujud)

For Motahhari, reality is rooted in existence itself rather than in the quiddity or essence of things. Existence is primary, while the "whatness" of objects is secondary and derivative. This foundational principle underpins both his theodicy and his broader defense of a God-centered worldview (Ghafoori Nejad, 2007; Mehdi et al., 2024).

The Gradation of Existence (Tashkik al-Wujud)

Existence is not a single, uniform category but rather a graded spectrum of intensity and perfection. At its apex stands God, who embodies the highest and most complete degree of being, while all other entities occupy lower, contingent levels. This hierarchical framework provides a cohesive vision of reality that bridges the material and the divine (Mehdi et al., 2024, Safari Kandsari, 2018; Soltani et al., 2026).

A Rejection of Monistic Idealism

Although Motahhari affirmed a profound spiritual dimension of reality, he decisively rejected the agnostic doctrine of the "individual unity of existence," the claim that only God possesses true reality and that the world is mere illusion (Safari Kandsari, 2018). He regarded this position as a form of sophistry that undermines both rational inquiry and empirical knowledge by denying the reality of the world and its multiplicity (Hesamifar, 2011). In its place, he advanced the alternative concept of "graded unity of existence," which upholds the genuine and independent reality of the created order.

Epistemology: A Multi-Dimensional Theory of Knowledge

Motahhari formulated his epistemological framework in critical dialogue with Western philosophy, specially aiming to refute materialism and subjective realism while articulating a uniquely Islamic theory of knowledge (Hesamifar, 2011; Motahhari, 1992). What distinguishes his approach is the synthesis of rational, empirical, and spiritual modes of knowing into a unified epistemic system.

The Three Dimensions of the Knowing Subject

Motahhari contended that the knowing subject is not a simplistic, unidimensional entity as posited by certain modern philosophical schools.

Rather, he conceived of it as comprising three interrelated dimensions (Omid, 2016):

- *Epistemological Aspect*: This connects to his doctrine of "intuitive rationality," the capacity to apprehend "secondary intelligibles" (such as causation and other philosophical concepts) as well as self-evident truths (Omid, 2016; Naghibi et al., 2019).
- *Ontological Aspect*: This is evident in his doctrines of "mental existence" (the manner in which things are present in the mind) and "perceptual abstraction" (the process by which the intellect derives concepts from material reality) (Omid, 2016; Naghibi et al., 2019).
- *Psychological Aspect*: This includes the notion of "knowledge by presence" (*al-ilm al-huduri*), which refers to a non-conceptual, immediate form of awareness that the mind possesses of itself (Omid, 2016; Naghibi et al., 2019).

Realism, Rejection of Idealism, and Sources of Knowledge

Motahhari's epistemology is grounded in a robust realism. He held that the external world exists independently of human consciousness and that our perceptual faculties are capable of representing it faithfully (Ahmadpoor, 2022; Hesamifar, 2011). He regarded subjective idealism, as exemplified by Berkeley, a form of sophistry that ultimately denies the reality of the extra-mental world (Ahmadpoor, 2022; Hesamifar, 2011).

Consistent with his strong realist position, Motahhari's epistemology incorporates a variety of knowledge sources (Abidin, 2019):

- Sense of Perception: The principal pathway to understanding the material, physical world is through the use of reason in the study of nature, an approach strongly encouraged by the Quran (Abidin, 2019; Abulhasani Naiyarki & Beheshti, 2013).
- Reason (*Aql*): Motahhari also emphasized the power of logical demonstration (*burhan*), through which human beings can apprehend non-material and rational realities. He accorded great significance to rational proof as a means of accessing truths beyond the physical realm (Abidin, 2019; Abulhasani Naiyarki & Beheshti, 2013).
- Purification of the Soul (*Tazkiyah*): A distinctive and indispensable source of knowledge is accessible though the purification of the soul, which enables a form of intuitive or revealed understanding and enhances the heart's capacity as an organ of perception (Abidin, 2019; Abulhasani Naiyarki & Beheshti, 2013).
- Study of Other's Works: Motahhari also recognized a pragmatic source of knowledge: the legitimate practice of learning from the scientific and scholarly contributions of others (Abidin, 2019; Abulhasani Naiyarki & Beheshti, 2013).

The Integration of Ontology and Epistemology

For Motahhari, ontology and epistemology were inseparable dimensions of a unified philosophical vision. The graded structure of reality (*tashkik al-wujud)* directly shapes the possibilities and limits of human knowledge. Because existence is a hierarchically ordered, knowledge itself must be multi-layered to correspond to these different ontological levels. Sensory perception suffices for the material domain, yet reason and spiritual refinement are indispensable for accessing immaterial truths and, ultimately, the Divine. This synthesis enabled Motahhari to articulate a religious worldview that is both rationally coherent and spiritually meaningful, while steadfastly rejecting the reductionism of materialism on one hand and the excesses of subjective idealism on the other (Hesamifar, 2011; Abidin, 2019).

Central to Motahhari's comprehensive worldview, his multi-dimensional conception of the knowing subject served both as a forceful critique of reductive, secular modern philosophies (Omid, 2016; Mutahhari, 1992) and as the groundwork for a distinctive Islamic perspective capable of addressing modern challenges (Mutahhari, 1992).

Implications for Social Research Methodology

Based on the scholarly literature, applying Ayatollah Motahhari's philosophical framework to social research methodology entails a fundamental departure from conventional social science paradigms. It calls for an approach that is simultaneously realist, multi-dimensional, and grounded in a transcendent worldview.

A Divergent Ontological and Epistemological Foundation

Motahhari's philosophical framework offers a distinctive alternative to mainstream Western sociological theories. His interpretation of social existence, grounded in *fitrah* (divine nature) and *tawhid* (monotheism), fundamentally departs from both Durkheim's social facts and Weber's social action (Bhat, 2018; Farsinejad & Arjomand, 2023; Mulyani, 2022). This departure is not superficial but manifested across three dimensions:

- Ontological (Nature of Social Reality): Whereas Durkheim conceived of social existence as an external, coercive force imposed upon the individual, and Weber understood it as a non-substantive product of individual actions, Motahhari grounded social reality in a deeper, divinely ordained human nature (Bhat, 2018; Farsinejad & Arjomand, 2023; Mulyani, 2022).
- Epistemological (How We Know Society): The means of apprehending this reality must extend beyond mere observation or interpretation to incorporate transcendental and moral dimensions (Bhat, 2018; Farsinejad & Arjomand, 2023; Mulyani, 2022).
- Axiological (Role of Values): In contrast to the value-neutrality espoused by positivism, social research within this framework is inherently value-laden, guided by divine and ethical principles.

This divergence results in a firm rejection of any attempt to superficially synthesize macro-sociological methodologies, such as Talcott Parsons' theory of social action, which Motahhari's framework deems "arbitrary and baseless" for its failure to recognize foundational ontological distinctions (Mulyani, 2022).

A Multi-Layered and Realist Social Methodology

Based on the above foundations, a social research methodology derived from Motahhari's thought would be characterized by the following principles:

A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Analysis

A recent study proposes a concrete four-layer analytical process for comprehending social dynamics in a holistic and transcendent manner. Grounded in Motahhari's interpretive framework, this approach examines: (a) individual consciousness in shaping social existence, (b) interrelations among social existences, (c) the internalization of social values by individuals, and (d) collective reflection upon social existence (Mulyani, 2022). The methodology seeks to bridge the individual and the social, as well as the material and the spiritual.

Realism Against Positivism and Subjectivism

Motahhari's philosophy offers a strong basis for critiquing positivism. His realist approach, comparable in some respects to Jurgen Habermas's critical realism, reinforces the opposition to positivism within the humanities and social sciences (Jamalzadeh & Hamed, 2022). Yet his critique remains distinctive in both its foundational principles and its broader objectives (Jamalzadeh & Hamed, 2022). This realism prevents social reality from being reduced to either purely objective facts or merely subjective interpretations, instead affirming it as a genuine, multi-layered phenomenon.

Transcendent Explanations for Social Dynamics

When extended to concrete social issues such as population studies, Motahhari's framework yields rich socio-cultural analyses firmly rooted in his philosophical principles (Cheraghi Kotiani, 2025). Moreover, his account of social change deliberately transcends purely materialist explanations by incorporating "spiritual causes" as active agents in societal transformation (Fouladi & Dehghanian, 2014). This confirms his methodology as one that synthesizes human agency, spiritual exigencies, and environmental factors within cohesive Islamic anthropological perspective (Fouladi & Dehghanian, 2014).

The Transcendent Realist Paradigm (TRP): A Proposed Framework

Based on the preceding discussion of Ayatollah Motahhari's philosophical view, particularly his integrated ontology and epistemology, his critique of both materialism and subjective idealism, and his emphasis on multi-dimensional human existence, I propose a distinct new paradigm for social research. I propose naming it the "Transcendent Realist Paradigm" (TRP). This paradigm is not merely a synthesis of existing approaches but a fundamentally different farmwork rooted in Motahhari's core principles.

An Overview of the TRP

The TRP is a comprehensive framework for social inquiry that integrates the material, rational, and spiritual dimensions of reality. It posits that social phenomenon cannot be fully understood through empirical observation alone (positivism) nor through subjective interpretation alone (interpretivism). Instead, it demands a multi-layered investigation that acknowledges a graded, God-centered reality, a multi-faceted human subject, and the inherent value-orientation of all knowledge production.

Dimension	Core Tenet of TRP	Rejection / Critique
Ontology	Reality is a graded hierarchy of existence, with God as the ultimate source and highest level of being. The material world is real but dependent and lower in the hierarchy of existence.	Materialism (reduces all to matter) and Subjective Idealism (denies an independent reality).
Epistemology	Knowledge is multi-sourced, derived from sense perception, reason (*aql*), and spiritual purification (*tazkiyah*). True knowledge is realist, representing an external reality.	Positivism (limits knowledge to senses) and Relativism/Subjectivism (denies objective truth).
Axiology	Social research is inherently value-laden and must be guided by divine and ethical principles. The goal of research is not mere description but the betterment humanity and its alignment with divine will.	Value-Neutrality (the Weberian ideal) and Utilitarianism (which reduces ethics to utility).

Human Nature	The human subject is multi-dimensional, possessing material, rational, and spiritual aspects. True freedom is liberation from carnal desires, which is a prerequisite for social freedom.	Economic Determinism, Psychological Reductionism, and One-Dimensional Conceptions of human agency.
Social Change	Social dynamics are driven by both material and spiritual causes. Change requires a transformation of consciousness and will, not merely structural or economic shifts.	Mechanical or Economical Determinism and Chaotic or Nihilistic Theories of Change.

Conclusion

The Transcendent Realist Paradigm, drawn from Motahhari's philosophy, offers a distinct and comprehensive alternative to mainstream social research methodologies. Its uniqueness lies in its refusal to separate the material from the spiritual, the rational from the ethical, or the individual from the divine. It provides a framework for scholars to conduct research that is intellectually rigorous, morally grounded, and ultimately oriented toward the betterment of human life in its fullest sense.

This paradigm does not reject the tools of modern social sciences but reorients them toward a more complete understanding of human existence. It challenges researchers to be not just objective analysts but also morally engaged seekers of truth, whose work contributes to the building of a just, compassionate, and spiritually vibrant society.

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