

An Anthropological Critique of the Modern Subject in the Teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt Based on ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s Reading

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Abstract

This study critiques the foundations of the “self-grounded modern subject” through the anthropological teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt, drawing upon the exegetical-philosophical framework of ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī. The central problem examined concerns the ontological and epistemological crises arising from the subject’s claim to autonomy and self-grounding throughout the development of Western humanism. Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology with a critical orientation, this library-based study first outlines the core pillars of the modern subject and subsequently evaluates them through the textual traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) within Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s anthropological framework. The findings indicate that within the epistemic system of the Ahl al-Bayt—in contrast to the autonomous modern subject—human identity is defined through relationality and essential poverty. The analysis demonstrates across three dimensions that: (1) in the ontological sphere, “povertial contingency” (*imkān-i faqrī*) refutes the Cartesian independent substance; (2) in the cognitive sphere, the Hadīth conception of the “worshipping intellect” (*‘aql-i ‘ābid*), elucidated via Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s theory of conventional perceptions (*idrākāt-i i‘tibārī*); and (3) in the teleological sphere, authentic human autonomy and purpose are realized solely through annihilation in the Absolute Reality (*fanā’ fī al-ḥaqq*) and self-sufficiency attained through servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*). Ultimately, this three-dimensional critique not only resolves the impasses of the modern subject but offers an alternative paradigm grounded in “self-knowledge within the station of servitude.”

Keywords: Teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt; Philosophical Anthropology; ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī; Modern Subject; Humanism.

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Introduction

The modern era brought about a major transformation in how human beings conceive of themselves and their relation to the world. Through this shift, the human person gradually transitioned from an entity defined relative to a transcendent order into an autonomous subject (*subjectum*) that views itself as the sole origin of understanding, normative judgment, and teleological determination. Far from being a simple adjustment in philosophical vocabulary, this reorientation reshaped modern anthropology by establishing human authority as the primary locus of cognition and valuation. Modern humanism served as the theoretical framework for this transformation, repositioning the human person not merely as an object of contemplation, but as the ultimate measure of reality and the sole arbiter of life's meaning.

Although this conceptualization initially emerged with an emphasis on human dignity, rationality, and agency, its historical evolution resulted in a perspective wherein humanity's connection to the Transcendent Origin, extra-mental reality (*ḥaqīqat-i nafs al-amrī*), and teleological ends transcending individual desire was progressively eroded. Accordingly, the modern subject is not solely an epistemological construct, but a distinct anthropological stance in which self-grounding becomes the defining principle of human nature. Examining the modern subject within the discourse of Western humanism is, therefore, an inquiry into an anthropology whose ramifications extend beyond philosophy into moral, cultural, and social domains.

In contrast to this framing, the epistemic worldview of the Ahl al-Bayt opens a different horizon for understanding human reality. Within this framework, the human being is not an unmoored, self-sufficient entity, but a reality defined as "sheer relationality" (*'ayn al-rabʿī*), possessing an inherent dignity whose true identity is realized only through an ontological connection to the Source of Being and movement toward a transcendent ultimate end. To systematically analyze and articulate these Hadīth traditions and supplications, the exegetical-philosophical framework of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī provides a highly effective instrument. Ṭabāṭabā'ī's thought possesses the conceptual rigor required to translate the insights embedded in the teachings of the Imams into a coherent critique of the anthropological foundations of the modern subject.

Despite the critical nature of this issue, existing scholarship reveals notable gaps. Most studies remain confined either to a generalized critique of humanism or to an internal critique of the modern subject within Western intellectual history. Even scholarship engaged with Islamic thought has largely favored abstract philosophical approaches. Consequently, the



primary gap in this field is the absence of a clear formulation demonstrating how an anthropology rooted in textual traditions specifically dismantles the self-grounding of the modern subject.

Accordingly, the central problem of this study is: How can a critical engagement with the foundations of the subject in modern humanist discourse be articulated through the epistemic worldview of the Ahl al-Bayt, utilizing ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s exegetical-philosophical framework? This research investigates how this critique operates across three distinct domains: the ontological, the cognitive (epistemological), and the teleological. The objective of this paper is to reorient the analytical focus from a purely speculative philosophical paradigm to a tradition-anchored framework—demonstrating that the Islamic critique does not target human dignity or self-awareness per se, but refutes the illusion of human independence and self-grounding.

Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology, this study first concisely reconstructs the historical evolution of the subject (from the Renaissance to the crises of meaning in thinkers such as Heidegger and Foucault) to establish the problematic context. It then develops the critique across three main spheres: (1) in the ontological sphere, by contrasting essential poverty (*imkān-i faqrī*) with illusory autonomy; (2) in the cognitive sphere, by establishing the primacy of textual traditions in understanding the intellect and deploying the theory of conventional perceptions (*idrākāt-i i’tibārī*) to delineate subject limitations; and (3) in the teleological sphere, by examining knowledge, servitude, and spiritual self-sufficiency (*istighnā’*) within supplications in relation to human primordial nature (*fiṭrah*). The core thesis of this paper is that within this paradigm, humanity’s ultimate end is “annihilation in the Absolute Reality” (*fanā’ fī al-ḥaqq*) rather than material self-actualization, offering a robust foundation for navigating the crises of the modern subject.

Literature Review & Research Gap

The critical evaluation of humanism and its central construct—the “modern subject”—has a significant history in both Western philosophy and contemporary Islamic thought. Within scholarship on this topic, existing studies can be broadly categorized into three main bodies of work:

The first category comprises studies directly examining ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s engagement with humanism. For instance, Nikseresht and Tabatabaei (2017) examine the moral and social ramifications of humanism through the lens of *Tafsīr al-Mizān*. Similarly, Qazi-Zahedi and Ghaffari Qarabagh (2023) offer a critical analysis of “spiritual humanism” as an anthropological foundation for separating spirituality from religion. In addition, Abbasi Azandaryani and Taghavi (2025) compare Islamic and



Western humanistic paradigms. While these works effectively demonstrate the broad contrast between Islamic theology and Western anthropocentrism, they present two key limitations: first, by focusing broadly on “humanism,” they bypass a detailed philosophical and ontological examination of its core component—namely, Cartesian-Kantian subjectivism; second, the textual traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt remain marginal or absent from their analytical frameworks.

The second category focuses on the constructive formulation of Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s anthropology. Studies such as Faghih Imani and Karimi (2022)—which explores the principle of affection (*maḥabbah*) within Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s anthropological framework and its social implications—alongside works centered on human primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), provide valuable insights into his thought. However, these works adopt an abstract, intra-religious approach and do not engage in critical dialogue with modern Western anthropology or the structural crises surrounding the subject.

The third category examines the concept of the “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and anthropological principles through supplications (*ad’iyah*) and Hadīth traditions. The primary methodological limitation of these studies is the lack of a structured philosophical-exegetical framework—such as Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s hermeneutical method—for interpreting textual traditions. As a result, their analyses often remain limited to ethical descriptions or isolated textual citations, rather than providing a rigorous philosophical critique of competing paradigms.

Based on this review, a significant gap remains in current scholarship: the absence of a textually anchored synthesis that systematically integrates four key axes—(1) the philosophical critique of the modern subject, (2) the structural examination of Western humanism, (3) the Hadīth corpus of the Ahl al-Bayt, and (4) ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s anthropological framework—into a unified conceptual framework. Existing research has yet to position Ṭabāṭabā’ī as a philosophical-exegetical bridge to extract and formulate a fundamental critique of the modern subject directly from textual traditions. The present study addresses this unexamined epistemological intersection through a structured analytical approach.

Theoretical Foundations

The analytical framework of this study rests upon three structural spheres that define the human condition in relation to three fundamental dimensions of existence: the ontological sphere (humanity’s relation to the Source of Being and its existential structure), the cognitive sphere (the human role in epistemology—specifically, whether priority lies in discovering objective reality or constructing it), and the teleological sphere (the source for defining the human good, perfection, and ultimate purpose).



Together, these three spheres form a unified conceptual framework through which the “self-grounding of the modern subject” is critically evaluated.

In this context, the present research applies the foundational concepts of ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s philosophy beyond an isolated metaphysical system, utilizing them as an exegetical and interpretive tool to articulate the anthropological teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt rationally. Accordingly, the critique of the modern subject across these three spheres rests on three theoretical pillars:

1. Relational Existence (*wujūd-i rābiʿ*) and Essential Poverty (*imkān-i faqrī*) in the Ontological Sphere In Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s ontology—which clarifies the monotheistic vision of religious texts—human reality is defined as sheer relationality (*‘ayn al-rabʿ*), dependency, and essential ontological poverty relative to the Transcendent Origin, rather than a self-subsistent, independent substance. This framework, expressed in Hadīth traditions through concepts such as absolute creaturely ownership (*mamlūkiyyat-i muṭlaq*) and existential servitude (*‘ubūdiyyat-i takwīnī*), directly challenges the Cartesian subject’s assumption of substantial independence. It demonstrates that within Islamic anthropology, any premise of human ontological self-grounding is inherently impossible—a negative proposition by virtue of the non-existence of its subject (*sālibah bi-intifā’ al-mawḍū’*).

2. Distinction Between Real and Conventional Perceptions in the Cognitive Sphere In his epistemological system, Ṭabāṭabā’ī distinguishes between real perceptions (*idrākāt-i ḥaqīqī*), which uncover objective extra-mental reality, and conventional perceptions (*idrākāt-i i’tibārī*), which are mental constructs designed to meet biological and social needs. Aligning with the role of the discovering intellect (*‘aql-i kāshif*) in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt, this distinction demonstrates that human cognitive agency cannot serve as the foundation for establishing truth or autonomous self-legislation, as proposed in Kantian subjectivism. Instead, the mind’s convention-making capacity remains dependent on and constrained by ontological realities.

3. Primordial Nature (*fiṭrah*) and Ontological Telos in the Teleological Sphere In Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s anthropology, human perfection and spiritual progression, alongside the determination of true wellbeing, are governed by an innate directional orientation embedded within human nature. This principle—reflecting the divine primordial nature (*fiṭrat Allāh*) and the pre-eternal covenant (*‘ahd-i azalī*) highlighted in textual traditions—invalidates the humanist premise of teleological self-grounding. Consequently, authentic human purpose is defined beyond subjective desire and individual will, with human perfection attained



through alignment with the teleological order of creation rather than absolute autonomy.

Research Methodology

In terms of its primary objective, this study constitutes basic theoretical research. Methodologically, it employs a descriptive-analytical, critical, and comparative approach, relying on documentary and library-based data collection. The analytical procedure begins by conceptualizing the core components of the modern subject as the object of critique. These components are then evaluated against the anthropological worldview of the Ahl al-Bayt, using the exegetical and philosophical framework of ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī.

Data processing and analysis proceeded in three sequential stages:

1. Historical Reconstruction: A concise reconstruction of the historical development of the modern subject—from Descartes to Kant and the subsequent crises of meaning in contemporary philosophy.

2. Textual Hermeneutics and Systematization: The extraction of anthropological principles from the Hadīth traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt through a hermeneutical analysis of textual sources, grounded in Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s philosophical (*hikmī*) and exegetical framework. In this stage, the textual evidence is structured across three core dimensions: (a) essential poverty (*imkān-i faqrī*) and existential servitude (*‘ubūdiyyat-i takwīnī*); (b) the cognitive-unveiling function of the intellect (*‘aql-i kāshif*) in contrast to conventional perceptions (*idrākāt-i i‘tibārī*); and (c) primordial (*fiṭrah*-based) teleology.

3. Critical Evaluation: A comparative critique examining these three dimensions against the structural components of the modern subject within the epistemic paradigm of the Ahl al-Bayt. This step highlights the fundamental contradictions between human self-grounding and monotheistic (*tawhīdī*) anthropology, detailing the philosophical implications of this divergence across all three spheres.

Research Findings

The Historical Evolution of the Concept of the “Subject” in Western Humanism

The evolution of the concept of the “subject” can be traced across four distinct historical periods. These junctures mark a major epistemological and ontological shift in Western thought: the transition of the human person from a “dependent creature” in the pre-Renaissance era to an “autonomous, self-grounding subject” in modern philosophy. This historical overview examines the stages through which human beings came to be positioned as the primary agents of cognition, normative judgment, and world orientation.



The Genesis of the Subject in the Renaissance

Beyond its role as a chronological period following the Middle Ages, the Renaissance transformed the epistemic foundations surrounding the human place in the cosmos. Medieval cosmology, synthesizing Christian theology with classical Greek philosophy, viewed the universe as a “Great Chain of Being” (*scala naturae*) in which every entity occupied a divine, predetermined, and teleological position. Within this framework, epistemology functioned as an auxiliary branch of theology, wherein human reason held validity primarily as the “handmaiden of theology” (*ancilla theologiae*). Viewed as a fallen and fragile creature, the human person understood cognition as dependent upon divine grace (Gilson, 1389 SH).

The Renaissance emerged largely in response to late medieval theological difficulties. Late medieval developments, particularly Nominalism, framed God as so radically transcendent and unknowable that the cosmic order appeared unpredictable and insecure to the human intellect. Consequently, traditional teleology no longer offered a secure basis for deciphering divine will or cosmic structure (Taylor, 2007). Within this intellectual context, reliance on human cognitive and practical capacities gradually strengthened—a development conceptualized by Hans Blumenberg as “self-assertion” (*Selbstbehauptung*) (Blumenberg, 1983).

This anthropocentric turn manifested primarily across three key domains:

1. The Copernican Revolution and Cosmological Reorientation: In medieval scholasticism, Ptolemaic-Aristotelian geocentrism held sacred theological meaning, causing alternative cosmological models to be viewed as heterodox challenges to ecclesiastical authority (Gilson, 1389 SH). Copernicus’s heliocentric model disrupted both the physical layout of the cosmos and its metaphysical foundations. While heliocentrism displaced Earth from physical centrality, it paradoxically elevated the observing human intellect. Understanding cosmic order relied increasingly on human empirical observation, mathematical calculation, and rational verification. Consequently, even as Earth lost its central position, human cognitive agency assumed an unprecedented central role (Cassirer, 1393 SH).

2. Overcoming Institutional Monopolies (*Ad Fontes*): The humanist call to return directly to primary sources (*ad fontes*) challenged the Church’s exclusive authority over the interpretation of reality. Although medieval discourse acknowledged human dignity, it did so strictly within the bounds of revelatory description. The key shift during the Renaissance involved framing the individual as an active agent seeking truth through rational inquiry and introspection rather than passive reliance on an



external, transcendent institution (Gilson, 1389 SH). This shift formed an essential precursor to modern subjectivity.

3. Redefining Human Agency and Destiny: Humanity's relationship with destiny underwent significant reinterpretation. Human beings were no longer viewed purely as passive observers expected to conform to a pre-established cosmic order, but as active agents capable of shaping the world and defining their own identity. Humans transitioned from spectators in the cosmic theater to active participants and transformers of reality (Cassirer, 1393 SH)—a central feature of modern subjectivity.

These cumulative developments established the historical conditions for the emergence of modern subjectivity. Nevertheless, the Renaissance did not yield a fully articulated or systematic philosophical formulation of the subject, nor did it immediately permeate all social institutions. Initially confined to humanistic education, literary circles, art, and the revival of classical antiquity, these ideas coexisted alongside resilient medieval theological and ecclesial structures. The authority of theology, the Church, and traditional social order remained intact, and nascent subjectivity was not yet codified as the foundational axiom of first philosophy; however, it created the necessary conditions for highlighting humanity as an active knowing subject and agent.

Therefore, the Renaissance should not be viewed as the final realization of modern subjectivity, but rather as its historical gestation stage. In this process, attention shifted from humanity as a member within a predetermined cosmic order toward humanity as an agent capable of understanding, judging, and intervening in the world. Humans moved from being understood primarily within a given cosmic framework to becoming active participants with the capacity to comprehend and alter reality—a horizon that enabled the explicit formulation of the modern subject in subsequent periods.

The Philosophical Foundations of Subjectivism in Cartesian Thought

Subjectivism reached a major turning point and acquired formal philosophical expression in the thought of René Descartes through his foundational proposition, *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") (Descartes, 1369 SH). What had emerged during the Renaissance as a socio-historical backdrop became an explicit epistemic principle in Cartesian rationalism: the idea that philosophical inquiry begins with the thinking subject. Employing methodological doubt (*doute méthodique*), Descartes challenged inherited epistemic traditions in order to base the structure of knowledge entirely upon the immediate certainty of the conscious self. Within the Cartesian framework, because primary certainty resides in self-awareness, all subsequent knowledge claims must be



justified through reference to this initial certainty. Consequently, when the *cogito* is established as the sole baseline of certainty, external domains—including tradition, the physical world, and theological doctrines—must demonstrate their validity before the judgment of human reason. Under this paradigm, autonomous reason becomes the primary criterion of truth and the foundation for evaluating reality (Copleston, 1388 SH).

By distinguishing mind from matter, Descartes established a dualism between the subject, or thinking substance (*res cogitans*), and the object, or extended substance (*res extensa*). This distinction reshaped epistemology and redefined the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. Nature was increasingly framed as an extended, quantifiable, and mechanically analyzable domain, rendering the external world an object of human cognition and control (Taylor, 1989). Consequently, human beings were no longer understood primarily as entities within a pre-given, meaningful cosmic order, but as the perceptual center and starting point for comprehending reality.

Thus, the anthropocentric tendencies originating in the Renaissance received a systematic philosophical formulation in Cartesian thought, establishing the subject as the foundation of certainty, judgment, and epistemological inquiry. Descartes should therefore be viewed not simply as an epistemologist, but as a key figure in establishing the modern understanding of the human person as a self-grounding subject—a conceptualization that carried broader ontological, ethical, and political implications in subsequent developments.

The Supremacy and Autonomy of the Subject in Kantian Philosophy

In this historical progression, subjectivism expanded from an epistemological starting point in Cartesian rationalism into a comprehensive philosophical paradigm, culminating in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In Kant's system, the subject shifted from being a foundation for certitude to the necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge (*Bedingung der Möglichkeit*) and, within ethics, the primary source of practical legislation. To address the epistemological deadlocks of rationalism and empiricism, Kant inverted the traditional relation between mind and object through his "Copernican Revolution." As he stated in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Hitherto it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to objects... Let us deal with the tasks of metaphysics by assuming that objects must conform to our cognition" (Kant, 1998, Bxvi).

Under this model, the human mind is no longer a passive mirror reflecting an objective reality in-itself (*noumenon*); rather, the conditions governing experience and the appearance of phenomena (*phenomenon*) are



structured by the mind's intrinsic *a priori* frameworks. By establishing a transcendental distinction between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*), Kant placed the subject at the center of philosophical inquiry, demonstrating that empirical experience is active, synthetic, and organized through the *a priori* forms of intuition and categories of understanding.

This epistemological centralization finds a clear expression in the realm of practical reason. Here, the concept of autonomy (*Autonomie*) dictates that moral obligation originates within practical reason itself rather than in external authority. By formulating the categorical imperative (*kategorischer Imperativ*) and emphasizing the self-legislation (*Selbstgesetzgebung*) of practical reason, Kant grounded moral validity in the autonomous will. Consequently, external domains—such as natural order, cosmic teleology, or divine commands—no longer serve as direct sources of moral normativity.

Within this framework, human beings are no longer passive discoverers of values within a pre-given natural or theological hierarchy; instead, as autonomous agents, they become the primary source of moral legislation and normative standards (Körner, 1389 SH). This shift in the grounding of value represents a major turning point in the development of the modern subject, altering humanity's relationship with both the physical world and the transcendent. The external world is emptied of intrinsic sacredness and teleology, becoming a domain that derives meaning within the horizon of human cognition and volition. This centrality of the subject acquired a historical and dialectical dimension in German Idealism, particularly in Hegel, where self-consciousness was linked to the historical unfolding of Reason (*Vernunft*).

The Crisis of the Modern Subject

Over time, the modern subject faced fundamental critiques that questioned its basic axioms and revealed its internal structural crisis. The philosophical project that began in the Renaissance and found structured expression in Cartesian rationalism and Kantian idealism was compelled to examine the limits, implications, and validity of its own foundations. Although this crisis was anticipated in the radical reflections of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, it acquired a more foundational formulation in the thought of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger directed his critique at the metaphysical underpinnings of subjectivity. In his essay "The Age of the World Picture" (*Die Zeit des Weltbildes*), he demonstrated how humanity shifted from an entity existing within the broader order of being to the sole reference point and foundation for all beings (Heidegger, 1977).



Heidegger describes this shift as follows: “The fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age. [...] Man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and its truth. Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such” (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 128–130). Under this reorientation, being is no longer understood as an independent domain distinct from human cognition; instead, reality is comprehended in relation to representation (*Vorstellung*) and control by the subject. The world is transformed into an “object” (*Gegenstand*) positioned before the knowing subject. Modern subjectivism is thus not simply an epistemological theory, but a mode of encountering the world in which entities are treated as objects before a human observer. Heidegger shows that self-grounding subjectivity is not only an epistemic claim, but a framework that directs humanity toward appropriation, exploitation, and organization. The ultimate consequence of this shift is the dominance of instrumental rationality and technology, wherein humanity's relation to Being changes from discovery and meaning to appropriation and exploitation (Heidegger, 1977).

Michel Foucault directed his critique toward humanistic essentialism. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argued that the autonomous, history-making “man” is not an eternal or universal truth, but a recent epistemological construct dating to the late eighteenth century. According to Foucault, the subject does not freely construct discourses and institutions; rather, intertwined networks of “power/knowledge” (*pouvoir/savoir*) produce and shape the subject. Foucault characterized this shift as the disappearance of man, comparing it to “a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault, 1389 SH). The subject—viewed in modern philosophy as the source of meaning, law, and history—is recognized as the product of mechanisms it previously claimed to govern.

By confining truth within the scope of subjective perception and cognitive categories, subjectivism established autonomy and individualism as core elements of modern discourse, positioning the subject as the center of legislation, valuation, and meaning. Although this process initially promised liberation from dogmatism and mastery over nature, it ultimately revealed internal contradictions. As post-structuralist critiques have shown, the subject intended to serve as an independent source of truth and meaning is itself formed within historical horizons, power structures, and specific modes of understanding. The crisis of the modern subject is therefore not simply the weakening of a philosophical theory; it marks the instability of the foundation on which modernity established humanity as the ultimate reference point for understanding, value, and meaning.



Critical Engagement with the Modern Subject Based on the Anthropological Teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt in ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s Thought

In responding to modern humanism and subjectivism, the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt offer a distinct anthropological framework. This perspective distinguishes itself, on the one hand, from medieval theological views that degraded human status through doctrines of inherent sinfulness, and on the other hand, from modern humanism's premise of absolute self-grounding. By integrating the Imami narrative tradition (*ḥadīth*) with Qur’ānic principles, ‘Allāmah Moḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī articulates an anthropological system in which human status is situated neither in absolute autonomy nor in complete degradation, but in the dual positions of divine vicegerency (*khilāfah*) and ontological dependence (*‘ayn al-rabṭ*).

This critique of the modern subject, grounded in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and developed through Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s exegetical and philosophical framework, is analyzed across three dimensions:

The Ontological Dimension: Contrasting the autonomous subject with existential contingency (*imkān-i faqrī*) and primordial servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*).

The Epistemological Dimension: Re-examining subjective cognition by distinguishing conventional, socially constructed perceptions (*idrākāt-i i‘tibārī*) from the cognitive function of the intellect (*‘aql-i kāshif*).

The Teleological Dimension: Reorienting modern anthropocentric autonomy toward primordial (*fiṭrah*-based) teleology and monotheistic perfection.

Critique of the Human Ontological Dimension

In the ontology of the modern subject, structured around concepts such as the Cartesian thinking substance (*res cogitans*) and the Kantian autonomous subject, human beings are assumed to possess existential independence and centrality when interpreting the world and establishing their relation to Being. In contrast, the anthropological framework of the Ahl al-Bayt defines human reality through essential ontological poverty (*al-faqr al-dhātī*) and complete dependence.

This existential poverty is expressed in the supplications (*ad‘iyah*) of the Imams. In the Supplication of ‘Arafah, Imam al-Ḥusayn rejects the notion of independent existence for any contingent entity relative to the Divine, stating: “My God! How can You be proved through that which, in its existence, depends upon You?” (Majlisī, 1403 AH, vol. 95, p. 225). Similarly, Imam al-Sajjād presents this poverty not as an accidental trait, but as an enduring feature of human reality: “I am the one who is needy of You in every state.”



‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī develops this tradition of essential poverty within his exegesis to critique the ontological foundations of the autonomous subject. In his commentary on the verse, “O mankind, you are those in need of Allah, while Allah is the Free of need, the Praiseworthy” (Qur’ān 35:15), Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains that this dependence reflects the core reality of human existence: “O people, insofar as you are created and divinely governed, you are entirely needy of God in every aspect of your being; whereas God, as Creator and Sustainer, is Self-Sufficient, and there is no self-sufficiency apart from Him” (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 17, p. 34). Poverty, in this framework, is not a conditional deficiency limited to specific aspects of life; rather, as a created entity under divine governance, the human person remains ontologically dependent upon the Other (*qā’im bi-al-ghayr*) across all dimensions of existence.

Drawing upon the monotheistic (*tawḥīdī*) perspective of the Ahl al-Bayt in his commentary on "Master of the Day of Judgment" (Qur’ān 1:4), Ṭabāṭabā’ī distinguishes between real (*ḥaqīqī*) and conventional (*i’tibārī*) ownership. He emphasizes that in real ownership, the existence of the possessed entity is grounded in and dependent upon the existence of the Owner, having no independent existence apart from Him (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 1, p. 21).

The integration of these Qur’ānic and ḥadīth doctrines demonstrates that the relation between humanity and the Divine is intrinsically ontological (*takwīnī*), rather than merely doctrinal or ethical. Defining the human subject as a self-subsistent and autonomous entity is therefore not simply a moral error, but an ontological misconception regarding human nature. Subjectivism effectively redefines a being that is inherently sustained by the Creator (*mutaqawwim bi-al-khālīq*) into an independent center of meaning.

From the perspective of the Imams and Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s exegesis, the root of this humanist error lies not in the possession of knowledge or power, but in the "illusion of autonomy" (*tawahhum al-istiqlāl*). Commenting on the Qur’ānic verse, “Nay! Man surely transgresses, because he sees himself self-sufficient” (Qur’ān 96:6–7), Ṭabāṭabā’ī emphasizes that human self-sufficiency (*istighnā*) is not an objective reality, but a deceptive perception (*an ra’āhu*) that absorbs the individual in self-regard and outward causes (*al-asbāb al-ẓāhiriyyah*), leading to existential rebellion (*tughyān*) against the Divine (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 20, p. 325). He observes: “This occurs because man becomes absorbed in himself and in the outward means through which he achieves his ends. Thus, he becomes oblivious to his Lord, failing to perceive any need for Him that would prompt remembrance



or gratitude for His blessings; consequently, he forgets Him and transgresses” (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 20, p. 325).

A central premise of modern subjectivism is that humanity requires no transcendent referent to determine its orientation toward the world. In contrast, in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt, even the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—who embodies the highest degree of existential perfection—acknowledges poverty and servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*). Within this framework, existential perfections indicate perpetual dependence upon the Divine Source (*mabdā’*), rather than grounds for self-sufficiency.

The primary divergence between Islamic anthropology and modern subjectivism appears in Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s reading of the well-known ḥadīth attributed to Imam ‘Alī: “He who knows himself knows his Lord” (*man ‘arafa nafsahu faqad ‘arafa rabbahu*). While Cartesian introspective reflection (*cogito, ergo sum*) leads to establishing the subject as an independent substance, self-knowledge within the ḥadīth tradition serves to invalidate this presumed autonomy. Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains this mechanism as follows:

“The human soul has no domain except within itself, no exit from itself, and no occupation other than the compelling journey along its own path. It discovers that it is severed from all things it once presumed to be united or intertwined with, except its Lord, who encompasses its inner and outer dimensions and everything beneath Him. Thus, the soul realizes that it is in perpetual solitude with its Lord, even when amidst a crowd of people. At that moment, it turns away from everything, directs itself toward its Lord, forgets all else, and remembers Him alone. Hence, no veil hides Him, and it is concealed by no screen—and this is the true cognition (*ḥaqq al-ma’rifah*) ordained for humanity” (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 6, p. 172).

Ṭabāṭabā’ī underscores that this tradition is not merely a moral exhortation, but an indication of an ontological reality (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., vol. 6, pp. 170–189). Genuine self-knowledge becomes possible only when one comprehends the soul within the horizon of essential poverty, relationality (*rabī*), and absolute dependence upon the Self-Subsisting Sustainer (*al-Qayyūm*). Self-knowledge, therefore, does not fortify an autonomous self—which would reproduce the subjective illusion—but leads directly to the Lord. In Islamic thought, self-knowledge is not a means to assert the subject, but a step toward dismantling the illusion of its independence.

In summary, the anthropological framework grounded in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and articulated by ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī offers a fundamental critique of the ontological pillars of humanism—specifically, the self-grounding and independence of the subject. If human reality is



intrinsically defined by essential poverty, relationality, and constant dependence upon God, any conceptual system that posits the subject as the ultimate origin of meaning and value rests upon a deep obliviousness (*ghaflah*) to human existence.

Extending into the contemporary social sphere, the concept of essential poverty (*al-faqr al-dhātī*) carries profound implications for the redefinition of human identity. This is because human existential dependence is not confined solely to a vertical relationship with the Transcendent Source (*mabdāʾ*); rather, it objectifies a horizontal relationality with society. In contrast to liberal anthropology, which posits individual identity as discrete, atomistic, and independent of others, existential poverty demonstrates that human beings, at their very essence, are dependent upon the Transcendent and, consequently, inextricably bound to one another. This existential dependence renders social responsibility and ethical relationality meaningful—not as an imposed conventional (*iʿtibārī*) contract, but as a natural extension of human existential reality. Such an approach defines individual identity in synergy with society, thereby precluding the alienation characteristic of modern humanity.

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Critique of the Human Epistemological Dimension

A foundational element of the modern subject is the status and function assigned to human reason. In Western humanism—from Cartesian subjectivism to Kantian idealism—reason is posited as an autonomous, legislative authority charged with independently discerning truth and establishing values. Over the development of this paradigm, rationality was gradually reduced from a capacity for uncovering reality to "instrumental reason" (*Zweckrationalität*), oriented toward controlling and managing the world. Although internal critics, most notably the Frankfurt School,



challenged the consequences of this shift, their critiques operated within the boundaries of the Western paradigm itself and did not yield a constructive alternative framework.

In defense of this autonomy, modern liberal theorists might argue that moral and epistemic autonomy is an indispensable condition for safeguarding individual dignity and liberty, and for averting dogmatism and external authoritarianism. However, as will be demonstrated below, tethering human dignity to a self-groundedness severed from the cosmic order ultimately engenders a crisis of groundless values; for genuine human dignity resides not in the negation of ontological authority, but in its conscious discovery

To formulate a critique from an alternative standpoint, one must turn to the epistemological foundations of the Ahl al-Bayt. In narrative traditions, the nature and function of reason differ essentially from the claims surrounding the modern subject. Within the logic of the Ahl al-Bayt, reason is not a self-grounded, truth-generating capacity, but an instrument for apprehending ontological realities and submitting to the Creator. Defining the essence of reason, Imam al-Ṣādiq states: “Reason is that by which the All-Merciful is worshipped and Paradise is attained” (al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH, vol. 1, p. 11). In this tradition, rationality is directly linked to servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*). Furthermore, in his counsel to Hishām, Imam al-Kāẓim designates reason as God’s “internal proof” (*ḥujjah bāṭiniyyah*) alongside the prophets as the external proof (*ḥujjah ṣāhiriyyah*): “Verily, God has two proofs over humanity: an external proof and an internal proof” (al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH, vol. 1, p. 16). The epistemic authority (*ḥujjiyyah*) of reason in this worldview is neither intrinsic nor independent of divine creation; rather, it is a derived authority posited subordinate to the Divine Will to enable humanity to decode the structure of cosmic reality.

In his philosophical formulation of these doctrines, ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī delineates the limits of human reason and dismantles its presumed autonomy through his theory of “conventional perceptions” (*idrākāt-i i’tibārī*), set forth in the sixth essay of *The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism* (*Uṣūl-i falsafah va ravish-i ri’ālism*). This theory demonstrates that despite its cognitive agency, the human mind cannot step outside the orbit of “worshipping reason” (*al-‘aql al-‘ābid*) to re-establish itself as a truth-creating entity.

By drawing a clear distinction between “real perceptions” (*idrākāt-i ḥaqīqī*) and “conventional perceptions” (*idrākāt-i i’tibārī*), Ṭabāṭabā’ī defines the precise boundaries of mental activity. Within this framework, real perceptions comprise concepts with objective, mind-independent referents, in which the mind acts receptively and conforms strictly to



reality—such as philosophical conceptions, judgments, and mathematical principles. Conversely, conventional perceptions are functional constructs generated by the mind to fulfill biological, natural, and social requirements. These concepts are posited, contractual, and practical, having no mind-independent referent (*nafs al-amr*) in objective reality, such as normative imperatives, moral values, and social conventions (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1402 AH, vol. 2, p. 143).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's primary anthropological critique of humanist epistemology crystallizes at this exact nexus, laying bare the core cognitive error of the modern subject. By overextending mental agency, humanism conflates the boundary between “discovering objective reality” and “constructing social conventions.” Because the modern subject exercises creative agency in the practical realm and formulates values, it wrongly infers that objective reality itself is a mental construct. According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the root of this error lies in applying the properties of conventional constructs to objective realities, thereby illicitly elevating reason from its reality-unveiling capacity (*kāshifiyyah*) to an absolute, truth-creating power (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1402: Vol. 2, 173-174). It is at this precise juncture that reason strays from the orbit of “that by which the All-Merciful is worshipped” and mutates into an instrument for subjective rebellion.

In philosophically articulating humanity's dependence on the cosmic order, 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī demonstrates that even the mind's convention-making capacity does not constitute an autonomous creation *ex nihilo*. Explaining how the human mind posits and constructs these mental concepts, Ṭabāṭabā'ī emphasizes: “None of the conventional perceptions represent entirely new elements or novel concepts in contrast to real perceptions” (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1402: Vol. 2, 166). Rather, every conventional perception is derived and adapted—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—from real perceptions under the pressure of internal drives and existential necessities. Consequently, these posited perceptions remain rooted in biological realities, primordial needs (*fiṭrah*), and cosmic truths: “Every one of these mentally posited concepts (*ma'ānī wahmiyyah*) is anchored upon an objective reality” (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1402: Vol. 2, 167). Elaborating on the generative relationship between real and conventional perceptions, he notes that “although thinking is an active process, this activity is neither arbitrary nor unrestricted; rather, it remains subordinate to objective reality and the actual state of affairs (*nafs al-amr*)... The foundational dynamic of mental and rational activity lies in the real, mind-independent relations of cognitive contents” (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1402: Vol. 2, 171-172).

This philosophical analysis serves as the epistemological counterpart to the doctrine of “essential poverty” (*al-faqr al-dhātī*) established in the



ontological realm. Just as human existence is utterly dependent upon God ontologically, human consciousness in the cognitive realm is strictly bounded by the parameters of the cosmic realities created by the Divine. Commenting on the Qur'anic verse, "And who would abandon the religion of Abraham except one who fools his own soul?" (Qur'ān 2:130), Ṭabāṭabā'ī references the prophetic tradition—"Reason is that by which the All-Merciful is worshipped"—to delineate the proper role of reason. Within this religious paradigm, reason derives its purpose solely in relation to servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) and the discernment of divine truth. Consequently, if reason detaches itself from divine guidance and transforms into an autonomous legislative authority, it abdicates its primary function. The same principle applies to the realm of values: if conventional perceptions are grounded in real human needs and the ontological structure of existence, value systems cannot be formulated in isolation from objective reality and human *fiṭrah*. This perspective fundamentally undermines the modern claim of absolute subjective autonomy. In Ṭabāṭabā'ī's framework, the human person acts as a discoverer and regulator of existential relations, rather than the ultimate legislator of truth (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d.: Vol. 1, 300).

Ultimately, within the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) as philosophically formulated by 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the human cognitive dimension is by no means negated; rather, it is restored to its proper locus. In this systemic framework, humanity functions as the "discoverer and organizer" of relations based on cosmic truths, rather than an "autonomous, ultimate positer" of reality. By delimiting the boundaries of self-grounded reason, this paradigm overcomes the deadlock of modern epistemic relativism and paves the way for a return to a revelation-anchored rationality—the worshipping reason (*al-'aql al-'ābid*).

Critique of the Human Teleological Dimension

A central element in the critique of the modern subject involves its formulation of the human *telos*—the ultimate purpose and finality of human existence. In the development of Western humanism, the subject is framed as an autonomous agent capable of defining its own purpose and establishing its criteria of perfection within an immanent, earthly horizon. Within this framework, human fulfillment is typically expressed through concepts such as self-actualization, individual autonomy, and the immanent flourishing of human capacities. The primary issue extends beyond the anthropocentric centering of humanity; rather, it lies in the subject assuming the role of ultimate normative authority in defining its own destiny.

To critique this self-grounded teleology, the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt present a distinct, transcendent horizon for human destiny. Within this



framework, the *telos* of human existential progression is defined not as self-assertion, but as self-transcendence and spiritual annihilation (*fanā*) in Absolute Reality. A key articulation of this teleological dimension appears in the statement of Imam al-Ḥusayn to his companions: “God, Almighty and Glorious, did not create His servants except that they might know Him; for once they know Him, they worship Him, and once they worship Him, they become—through His worship—dispensed from the worship of any other” (Ibn Bābawayh, 1378 AH, vol. 1, p. 9).

In this tradition, human perfection and finality are structured in a three-stage process: gnosis (*maʿrifah*), servitude (*ʿubūdiyyah*), and true emancipation (*istighnā*). The key distinction regarding the modern subject resides in the concept of *istighnā* (transcendent self-sufficiency). Whereas Western humanism pursues autonomy by detaching the subject from the Origin of Being and relying on the isolated self, the Ahl al-Bayt paradigm demonstrates that authentic liberation is achieved through connection to the Infinite through divine servitude. Any *telos* constructed outside this divine orientation confines humanity within immanent materiality and subjective isolation.

Through an exegetical and philosophical approach, ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī demonstrates that this ultimate purpose (*maʿrifah* and *ʿubūdiyyah*) is neither a contingent moral recommendation nor a conventional prescription, but is anchored in the primordial, ontological constitution (*fiṭrah*) of human nature. Commenting on the Qurʾānic verse, “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me” (Qurʾān 51:56), and drawing upon the statement of Imam al-Ḥusayn, Ṭabāṭabāʾī interprets worship through the lens of cognitive gnosis, observing: “The supreme objective refers to that specific divine mercy which ensues from worship, which is itself the unique beatitude (*saʿādah*) stemming from gnosis” (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, n.d., vol. 18, p. 391).

To explain the ontological rationale behind this teleology, ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī invokes the Qurʾānic concept of *fiṭrah* (primordial nature). In his exegesis of the verse, “So set your face toward the religion as a person of pure faith—the *fiṭrah* of God upon which He has created humanity” (Qurʾān 30:30), he demonstrates that the human *telos* is neither a contractual convention nor a byproduct of socio-historical constructs, as modern human sciences contend. Rather, it is embedded within the existential structure of humanity. Humans are created with an innate nature that propels them ontologically toward a perfection commensurate with their true reality (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, n.d., vol. 16, p. 178). Consequently, *fiṭrah* cannot be reduced to a latent capacity among others; it serves as the foundational principle governing the direction of human life. From this

perspective, the human *telos* is not self-posed. Humanity does not unilaterally dictate its purpose; rather, it must discover its *telos* in relation to its existential reality. Ṭabāṭabā'ī maintains that human beatitude (*sa'ādah*) is rooted in a shared ontological constitution, rendering it irreducible to fluctuating individual or collective desires. Indeed, humanity shares a unified orientation toward beatitude or misery (*shaqāwah*), given that perfection and deficiency are defined by universal human realities (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d., vol. 16, p. 179). Thus, while the historical manifestations of the human *telos* may vary across epochs and cultures, its underlying essence remains bound to an immutable reality.

Within this analytical framework, humanist teleology involves an ontological reductionism. When the modern subject defines its purpose solely in terms of immanent gratification and egoistic autonomy, it acts contrary to its substantial movement (*ḥarakat-i jawharī*). Ṭabāṭabā'ī grounds this movement philosophically through the Qur'ānic declaration, "...Indeed, to God we belong, and to Him we shall return" (Qur'ān 2:156). He asserts: "The reality of this principle is that human beings belong ontologically to God as His true domain, and their ultimate trajectory is a return toward God, the Glorified" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d., vol. 1, p. 353). In this paradigm, returning to the Origin of Being is not an accidental choice, but an intrinsic, ontological necessity of human existence.

Furthermore, Ṭabāṭabā'ī explains the link between self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) and existential teleology, as expressed in the tradition: "He who knows himself knows his Lord." Within this framework—and in contrast to modern psychology, which seeks to uncover and centralize subjective power—self-knowledge serves as a gateway to intuiting one's absolute existential poverty (*al-faqr al-muṭlaq*) and essential dependence upon the Creator. Ṭabāṭabā'ī emphasizes that the human soul is itself the path toward the Lord, and God is the ultimate destination of this journey (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d., vol. 6, p. 166).

In conclusion, the divergence separating the anthropology of the Ahl al-Bayt from the modern formulation of the subject reflects a foundational difference regarding human nature. A subject that restricts its horizon of perfection within the confines of the ego and the immanent realm conflicts with its authentic, primordial self. This conflict explains why modern anthropology often leads to existential bewilderment and nihilism stemming from ontological severance. Conversely, the *telos* presented in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and philosophically formulated by 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī connects human existence to the divine encounter (*liqā' Allāh*), opening an infinite horizon of meaning anchored in Absolute Truth.



Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of the modern construct of the subject and the theological anthropology grounded in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt, this study demonstrates that contemporary crises of modern thought stem from a fundamental misconceptualization of human identity and ontology. The modern subject's pursuit of absolute autonomy and its ontological severance from the Origin of Being have not resulted in genuine emancipation; instead, they have generated severe epistemological and ethical impasses. To address these challenges, this study moves beyond purely negative philosophical critique by placing the epistemic framework of the Ahl al-Bayt at the center as an explanatory model, utilizing the philosophical and exegetical framework of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī to articulate these religious principles in a systematic and rational manner.

Across the three primary dimensions examined, this study reveals major theoretical divergences:

In the Ontological Domain: Reducing the human person to a knowing subject (*res cogitans*) detached from the Transcendent—as exemplified in Cartesian and Kantian frameworks—directly contradicts the monotheistic principles of existential poverty (*al-faqr al-wujūdī*) and pure relationality (*al-rabṭ al-mahḍ*). Based on Imami traditions and Ṭabāṭabā'ī's philosophical formulation, human existence is ontologically identical to dependence on the Creator, making any claim to self-subsistent independence an illusion that alienates humanity from its true nature.

In the Epistemological Domain: The modern subject relies on autonomous, instrumental reason (*Zweckrationalität*), presenting itself as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Grounded in the tradition, “Reason is that by which the All-Merciful is worshipped,” this study demonstrates that authentic reason is not a tool for dominating nature, but God's internal proof (*ḥujjah bāṭiniyyah*) guiding humanity toward divine servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*). Furthermore, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's theory of conventional perceptions (*idrākāt-i i'tibārī*) shows how practical reason, when detached from revelatory guidance, becomes trapped in posited constructs and fails to perceive objective reality.

In the Teleological Domain: The analysis highlights a fundamental contrast between modern immanent teleology and the transcendent horizon of the Ahl al-Bayt. Human finality in Islam is not confined to material self-actualization or world dominion, but is realized through the process of gnosis (*ma'rifah*), servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*), and transcendent self-sufficiency (*istighnā*). Ṭabāṭabā'ī's articulation of primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) demonstrates that movement toward this *telos* represents an



ontological necessity (*ḍarūrah takwīniyyah*) for returning to Absolute Perfection, which constitutes the sole path to genuine existential tranquility.

Although liberal theorists posit the autonomy of the modern subject as a necessary defense against dogmatism and a guarantor of individual liberty, the present analysis demonstrates that this self-groundedness ultimately decouples values from objective ontological reality, culminating in a crisis of meaning. In contrast, revelation-guided rationality—the worshipping reason (*al-‘aql al-‘ābid*)—within the tradition of the Ahl al-Bayt redefines human dignity through a conscious alignment with authentic existential truths, thereby averting the pitfalls of epistemic authoritarianism.

Ultimately, the approach of this study shows that addressing contemporary anthropological dilemmas requires transitioning from the paradigm of the autonomous human to that of the vicegerent (*khalīfat Allāh*). Within the framework of the Ahl al-Bayt, human dignity and freedom are defined not through rebellion against the Source of Being, but through conscious connection and submission to Divine Reality. This theoretical foundation provides a viable basis for cultural policy formulation and scholarship within Islamic humanities. Future research may build upon these findings by conducting comparative studies on the crisis of meaning in the postmodern subject, drawing upon the ethical and educational teachings of the Imams to clarify the practical and social dimensions of this model.

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