



The meaning of life; A Social Construct or An Objective Matter; Comparative Study of Peter Berger and Mohammad Taqi Jafari's Opinion

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 27 April 2024 Received in revised form: 22 October 2024 Accepted: 07 November 2024 Published online: 21 December 2024</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Constructivism, Meaning of life, Mohammad Taqi Jafari, Objectivism, Peter Berger.</i></p>	<p>One of the fundamental issues of human life is the meaning of life. This topic has become a relatively independent area of study in recent decades. The issue can be examined from different perspectives, with the construction of life's meaning or its objectification beyond individual and social constructs being one of the important areas that has generated diverse scholarly views. The key questions are: Does a person construct meaning for life, or is the world inherently meaningful, requiring only that an individual align their life with this meaning to achieve a meaningful existence? This article compares the views of Peter Berger and Mohammad-Taqi Jafari on this subject. The research was conducted using a hermeneutic method inspired by John Plamenatz. The research reveals that while Peter Berger and Mohammad-Taqi Jafari share many similarities in their analysis of life's meaning and acknowledge the central role of religion in providing meaning, they differ in their perspectives on how meaning is established—whether through construction or discovery. Berger views the meaning of life as a social construct, whereas Mohammad-Taqi Jafari considers meaning as an objective reality that humans can comprehend by harmonizing with existence.</p>
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1. Introduction

One of the fundamental issues of human life is the meaning of life. Although the question of human life's meaning has been raised in various ways throughout history, in the pre-modern era, humans were less confronted with the challenge of life's meaning. Therefore, it can be argued that the question of life's meaning is essentially a modern inquiry. A central question in studying the meaning of life is whether it is something constructed by humans and human society, or an objective reality that can be discovered by humans. This article presents a comparative study of Peter Berger's and Mohammad-Taqi Jafari's perspectives in this field:

- Given the comparative nature of this research, three key questions are explored:
- Berger's perspective on the discovery or construction of life's meaning
- Jafari's perspective on the discovery or construction of life's meaning
- The relationship between these two perspectives and their potential to enhance mutual understanding

The primary purpose of this research is to understand these two different perspectives in relation to each other. By examining them comparatively, the limitations and strengths of each approach become more apparent. Most previous research on Berger has focused on his sociology of knowledge or sociology of religion. His views on the meaning of life have received less attention. Similarly, while Jafari's perspective on life's meaning has been widely discussed, little serious scholarly examination has been devoted to analyzing whether his approach is objective or constructive. Notably, a comparative analysis of his objective view with Berger's constructivist approach has been largely overlooked.

2. Methodologie

This research employed a textual approach. In the textual method, the primary focus is on the expressions that convey the thoughts of the specific thinkers under examination. Inspired by Plamenatz's method (Plamenatz et al., 2012: xiii; Plamenatz, 1963: ix-x), the statements related to both thinkers were repeatedly read to uncover the various dimensions of their thought. In the second stage, the revealed ideas were carefully examined multiple times to achieve a deeper level of understanding. Finally, the two sets of ideas were studied in relation to each other to:

- Better comprehend the weaknesses of each perspective
- Highlight the strengths of each approach
- Provide a more nuanced comparative analysis

By examining the limitations of each thinker's perspective, the inherent strengths of the alternative viewpoint become more apparent and illuminating.

3. Findings

In this article, Peter Berger's and Jafari's views on the constructedness or objectivity of life's meaning were examined.

Peter Berger's Perspective

Berger's theory is rooted in the social construction of reality, which suggests that humans create their understanding of reality through interactions with others. In this view, meaning is socially defined and organized, and thus subject to social change.

Berger emphasizes a dialectical process where individuals:

- Externalize social reality

- Create or maintain institutions
- Simultaneously construct an objective reality
- Become social products through this process

Berger views humans as moldable beings who continuously alter societal factors. Through this process, society becomes an objective reality that eventually transforms individuals into "pawns of society" - products of their own creation.

Key insights from Berger include:

- Human need for meaning is as crucial as material needs
- Reality is inherently chaotic, and humans create meaning to understand it
- Meaning-making involves establishing order and comprehensibility
- Consciousness and meaning emerge from communicative experiences
- Value systems, particularly religion, play a significant role in creating meaning

Jafari's Perspective

In contrast to Berger, Jafari approaches meaning from a realist philosophical standpoint:

- The fundamental human drive is the "I want" phenomenon
- Contemporary human suffering stems from a sense of aimlessness
- Meaning is discovered, not constructed
- Values and goals genuinely guide human transformation

Jafari's view of life's meaning encompasses three core elements: Interpretability, Value, Purposefulness.

Critically, he sees life's meaning as:

- Connected to eternity
- Not merely an instrumental value
- Gradually achieved, with intrinsic value at each stage
- Fundamentally linked to spiritual and religious understanding

Comparative Analysis

While Berger and Jafari differ in their epistemological approaches, they converge on several key points:

- The critical importance of meaning in human experience
- The central role of religion in providing life's purpose
- The transformative potential of understanding one's existence

4. Discussin and Conclusion

Peter Berger and Jafari share a similar analysis of meaning's characteristics, emphasizing comprehensibility, value orientation, and purposefulness. However, Jafari uniquely considers values and purposes rooted in eternity as truly meaningful.

Shared and Divergent Perspectives

Characteristics of Meaning

- Comprehensibility is fundamentally based on life's purposefulness and value orientation
- Religion plays a crucial role for both thinkers in understanding life's meaning

Religious Interpretation

Berger and Jafari diverge significantly in their understanding of religion:

- Berger views religion as a social construct, primarily serving to create meaning and purpose
- Jafari believes in an objective, transcendent religious truth beyond human creation

Anthropological and Philosophical Differences

Human Nature and Society

- Berger sees humans as fundamentally shaped by society
- Jafari agrees that personality is socially influenced but rejects that human nature is entirely socially constructed

Values and Goals

- Berger considers values and goals as social constructs independent of individual preferences
- Jafari believes values are connected to human essence and transcend social construction

Methodological Distinctions

Interpretation Approach

- Berger employs a phenomenological method, seeing meaning as existing within human perception
- Jafari, as an essentialist philosopher, analyzes meaning independently of social perception

Fundamental Philosophical Difference: Meaning Creation vs. Absorption

Berger's Perspective

- The world is an unorganized, meaningless space
- Humans actively project and create meaning in fragments of existence

Jafari's Perspective

- The world is inherently meaningful
- Meaning is not projected but absorbed from the world's intrinsic essence.

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