



TRANSCENDENCE AND CIVILIZATION: UNDERSTANDING THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN PROGRESS

Dr. Samina Qureshi

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: s.qureshi@numl.edu.pk

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Abstract: *This article explores the metaphysical dimensions of transcendence as a foundational principle shaping human civilization and historical progress. Drawing upon classical and contemporary metaphysical frameworks, the study argues that civilizations that root their moral, political, and cultural order in transcendental ideals—such as the divine, the good, or the absolute—achieve greater coherence, resilience, and ethical advancement. Through an analysis of religious traditions, philosophical schools, and civilizational milestones across history, the paper presents transcendence not merely as a theological or mystical notion but as a crucial metaphysical driver behind the formulation of laws, values, education systems, and artistic expressions. The study also evaluates challenges posed by secular modernity and technological materialism, calling for a reintegration of metaphysical insight in contemporary global civilization.*

INTRODUCTION:

Human civilization has long been animated by metaphysical principles—concepts that transcend empirical observation and point toward ultimate reality. Transcendence, as an idea that connects the finite with the infinite, has informed religious doctrines, moral systems, and even scientific progress throughout history. This paper investigates the hypothesis that transcendence functions as a civilizational cornerstone, shaping humanity's quest for meaning, order, and advancement.

1. Understanding Transcendence in Metaphysical Thought

Definitions from Eastern and Western Traditions

Transcendence refers to the existence or experience that goes beyond the physical level of being—extending past sensory perception and empirical reasoning. In metaphysics, it is often contrasted with immanence (the divine within the world) and centers on realities beyond the material.

In **Western philosophy**, transcendence is rooted in **Platonic idealism**, where abstract Forms (e.g., Goodness, Beauty) are more real than their physical manifestations. Later, **Kantian transcendence** posited that while the “noumenal” (thing-in-itself) realm exists beyond human experience, it still conditions our understanding of the phenomenal world [4].

Eastern philosophies, such as **Vedanta** and **Buddhism**, see transcendence as unity with the ultimate reality (Brahman or Nirvana), where the self is dissolved into a higher consciousness. Similarly, **Islamic metaphysics** views transcendence through **Tawheed**, the oneness and absolute otherness of God (Allah), who is both beyond and sustaining all creation [5][10].

Despite different formulations, both traditions agree that human flourishing and civilizational development are enriched by a connection to a higher, non-material source of meaning and purpose.

Ontological, Epistemological, and Moral Dimensions

1. Ontological Dimension

Ontology, the study of being, finds in transcendence a necessary anchor for explaining existence itself. Without a transcendent ground, being collapses into relativism or nihilism. **Ibn Sina (Avicenna)** argued that contingent beings point to a necessary being—an ontological necessity for grounding reality [10].

2. Epistemological Dimension

Transcendence challenges the boundaries of rational knowledge. While science and logic provide valid tools for understanding the material world, metaphysical inquiry demands **intuitive, spiritual, or revelatory** modes of knowing. Thinkers like **Al-Ghazali** and **Plotinus** emphasized the insufficiency of reason alone in grasping ultimate truths [6][7].

3. Moral Dimension

Ethics derived from transcendent sources offer universal moral values not bound by historical or cultural fluctuations. In the **Abrahamic traditions**, divine commandments form the moral bedrock of society. The concept of ‘**maqasid al-shariah**’ in Islamic ethics, for instance, aligns moral actions with ultimate metaphysical goals such as justice and mercy [15].

Understanding transcendence within metaphysical thought reveals its central role in defining reality, truth, and values. Civilizations that internalize this dimension develop systems of governance, culture, and ethics that transcend mere material utility and temporal power.

2. Historical Civilizations Anchored in Transcendental Thought

Human civilizations have historically grounded their cultural, moral, and political orders in transcendental concepts—principles that surpass empirical reality and connect humanity to a

higher cosmic or divine order. These metaphysical ideals acted as civilizational compasses, offering a unified vision of truth, justice, and purpose.

Egyptian Ma'at, Vedic Dharma, and Platonic Forms

Ancient Egypt revolved around the principle of **Ma'at**, a metaphysical concept symbolizing truth, justice, harmony, and cosmic order. Ma'at was more than a deity—it was a guiding law for Pharaohs and citizens alike, shaping rituals, laws, and the judgment of souls in the afterlife [2]. This belief in a divinely ordained order enabled a remarkably stable civilization that endured for over three millennia.

In the Vedic tradition of India, Dharma plays a comparable transcendental role. It is not merely a legal or social code but a metaphysical law sustaining the universe, requiring individuals to live in accordance with their cosmic duty. The **Bhagavad Gita** famously emphasizes that righteousness (Dharma) upholds both personal integrity and societal equilibrium [3]. The metaphysical grounding of Dharma allowed Indian civilization to maintain continuity despite political upheavals.

Greek civilization, particularly through **Plato**, articulated the idea of **Forms**—eternal, unchanging realities of which all earthly phenomena are mere imitations. According to Plato, justice, beauty, and goodness exist independently in the realm of Forms, and a just society must align itself with these ideals [4]. These metaphysical constructs deeply influenced not only Greek ethics and education but also later Christian and Islamic philosophical thought.

Islamic Tawheed and the Integration of Reason and Revelation

The **Islamic civilization** is perhaps one of the most coherent examples of a society built on a **transcendental monotheistic** foundation—**Tawheed**, the absolute oneness of God. This metaphysical principle is not merely theological; it informs **ethics, politics, law, education, and science** in the Islamic worldview. Unlike dualistic models separating the sacred and the secular, Tawheed integrates all realms of existence under a unifying metaphysical framework [5][10].

Islamic thinkers such as **Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Al-Ghazali** sought to harmonize **reason** ('aql) and **revelation (wahy)**, asserting that both lead to truth when rightly understood. This led to the **Islamic Golden Age**, where metaphysical clarity fueled advancements in medicine, astronomy, architecture, and governance [6][10]. Institutions like **Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom)** exemplify how transcendental ideals can guide empirical inquiry without contradiction.

These historical examples underscore a key argument: civilizations that root themselves in transcendental metaphysical principles tend to achieve **moral coherence, institutional longevity, and cultural depth**. Whether through Ma'at's balance, Dharma's righteousness, Plato's idealism, or Tawheed's unity, the metaphysical grounding of civilization fosters a vision of collective purpose that transcends material limitations and temporal crises.

3. Transcendence and the Development of Law, Art, and Ethics

Transcendence, as a metaphysical notion of reality beyond the material, has profoundly shaped the moral frameworks, legal systems, and artistic expressions of civilizations throughout

history. By anchoring the human experience in higher ideals—whether divine law, cosmic justice, or ultimate beauty—societies have built ethical orders and aesthetic cultures that reflect enduring values rather than transient impulses.

Sacred Law Codes (e.g., Sharia, Mosaic Law)

Legal systems rooted in transcendence derive authority from a source higher than human consensus, often claiming divine origin. Two of the most influential examples are **Mosaic Law** in Judaism and **Sharia** in Islam:

- **Mosaic Law**, as outlined in the **Torah**, is not simply a code of conduct but a manifestation of a covenant between God and His people. It encompasses not only civil and criminal matters but also rituals, dietary rules, and moral injunctions—all grounded in the belief that obedience to divine will preserves both individual righteousness and communal harmony [1].
- **Sharia**, derived from the Quran and Sunnah, similarly views law as a reflection of **divine order (Tawheed)**. It integrates metaphysical concepts like **justice ('adl)**, **mercy (rahma)**, and **trust (amanah)** into practical governance, personal conduct, and societal welfare. Jurists such as **Imam Al-Shafi'i** and **Al-Mawardi** argued that Sharia ensures both worldly justice and spiritual fulfillment [5][6].

Such sacred legal systems have historically fostered **cohesion, accountability, and spiritual orientation**, making law not just a tool of control but a path toward transcendental alignment.

Metaphysical Themes in Classical Literature and Art

Art and literature have always served as vehicles for expressing the human longing for the transcendent. Classical works are imbued with metaphysical themes that explore the meaning of life, the nature of good and evil, and the quest for the divine:

- In **Persian Sufi poetry**, poets like **Rumi** and **Hafiz** composed verses saturated with metaphors of divine union, spiritual ecstasy, and the soul's journey toward the Infinite. Rumi's vision of God as the **Beloved** transforms human emotion into a ladder toward transcendence [7].
- **Greek tragedies**, such as those by **Sophocles**, probe metaphysical questions of fate, justice, and the limits of human knowledge. The tension between divine will and human agency reflects the ancient struggle to reconcile earthly existence with cosmic order [4].
- **Islamic calligraphy and architecture**, such as the **Alhambra** or **Blue Mosque**, are deeply metaphysical in nature. The use of geometric patterns, Arabic script, and symmetry symbolizes the **infinite unity and perfection of God**, transforming space itself into an act of worship [15].
- In **medieval Christian art**, the halo, the use of gold leaf, and ascension motifs convey themes of sanctity, divine presence, and the soul's journey beyond material constraints [2].

Across these diverse traditions, art and literature have acted as **mirrors of the metaphysical**, elevating collective consciousness and nurturing civilizations with spiritual and moral clarity.

Law, art, and ethics—when rooted in transcendence—do more than regulate or decorate life; they guide the soul, discipline society, and elevate human imagination. Whether in the

codification of divine will into law or the depiction of metaphysical truths through artistic forms, transcendence has endowed civilizations with **direction**, **meaning**, and **timeless beauty**.

4. Crisis of Meaning in Secular Civilizations

Nietzschean Nihilism and Postmodern Skepticism

The modern shift toward secularism and materialism, especially in Western civilization, has led to what philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** famously called the “death of God” [12]. In his view, modernity’s abandonment of metaphysical belief systems had created a **vacuum of meaning**. Without transcendence, values become relative, morality is untethered from any absolute source, and civilization risks descending into **nihilism**—the belief that life lacks inherent meaning or value.

This crisis deepened with **postmodern thought**, which critiques all grand narratives, including religious and metaphysical systems. Thinkers like **Jacques Derrida** and **Michel Foucault** emphasized the instability of meaning and the constructed nature of knowledge and ethics [13]. While such critiques have unveiled the biases of traditional systems, they have also **eroded the foundations of shared moral consensus**.

In this worldview, truth is no longer discovered but constructed; morality is contingent, not cosmic. Consequently, society faces **existential fragmentation**, where individuals struggle to find purpose beyond consumption, entertainment, or identity politics.

Technological Advancement Without Metaphysical Grounding

The 21st century has witnessed exponential growth in **technology**, **science**, and **communication**. While these achievements have improved life expectancy, mobility, and productivity, they often **lack a metaphysical framework** to direct their ethical application. The dominance of utilitarian logic—what works is what is good—has displaced deeper philosophical reflection on what ought to be.

For instance:

- **Artificial Intelligence** raises profound questions about consciousness, personhood, and moral responsibility—but few technological innovators are trained in metaphysics or ethics [14].
- **Environmental degradation**, driven by unrestrained industrialization, reflects a civilizational detachment from the sacredness of nature [19].
- The **commercialization of education, medicine, and even religion** reflects the replacement of transcendental purpose with profit-driven pragmatism.

This secular-technocratic paradigm is efficient, but not **wise**. It builds tools but not meaning, systems but not values. Without transcendence, civilization risks becoming materially sophisticated but spiritually hollow.

5. Reviving Transcendence in Contemporary Civilizational Discourse

Interfaith Dialogue and Perennial Philosophy

Amid this crisis, there is a growing movement toward **reviving transcendence** through dialogue and rediscovery of shared metaphysical principles across traditions. **Interfaith**

dialogues—between Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and indigenous belief systems—reveal a **perennial philosophy**: a set of metaphysical truths common to all spiritual paths. These include belief in the sacred, the moral order of the universe, the soul's journey, and the primacy of compassion [3][15].

The **Traditionalist School**, represented by thinkers like **René Guénon**, **Frithjof Schuon**, and **Hossein Nasr**, calls for a return to **sacred cosmology**, where science, art, ethics, and law are all oriented toward the transcendent [1]. This school does not oppose progress but demands that progress be guided by eternal principles.

Such discourse reaffirms that civilizations flourish when they are rooted in shared **metaphysical ideals**, not merely economic or political interests.

Role of Education and Spiritual Philosophy in Global Ethics

A meaningful civilizational revival requires **reform in education**, where **spiritual philosophy** is reintegrated into curricula. Rather than treating religion, philosophy, and science as separate or competing domains, educational institutions can promote **integrated knowledge**—where the metaphysical, moral, and empirical coalesce.

Examples include:

- The **Al-Azhar curriculum** in Egypt and the **International Institute of Islamic Thought** advocating for **Tawheedic epistemology** [10]
- Reintroduction of **Socratic dialogue**, **Vedantic studies**, or **Sufi ethics** in humanities programs globally
- Training scientists and engineers in **philosophy of ethics** and metaphysical implications of their innovations

Global institutions like **UNESCO** increasingly recognize the importance of **spiritual and cultural heritage** as essential to sustainable development and peace [20].

Summary:

This study concludes that civilizations that embrace a transcendent foundation—where values are grounded in metaphysical universals rather than transient socio-political constructs—demonstrate higher moral and intellectual endurance. While modernity has introduced remarkable technological and material progress, it often lacks a coherent metaphysical anchor, resulting in existential fragmentation and moral relativism. Reintegrating transcendent ideals can enrich global discourse, bridging tradition with innovation and restoring a sense of unified human purpose.

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