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The Concept of Identity in Allameh Tabataba’i and Søren Kierkegaard

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Abstract

Identity has been a central theme in both Islamic philosophy and Western existential thought, though articulated through different conceptual frameworks. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the notion of identity in the philosophy of Allameh Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i (1903–1981), a leading contemporary Shi’i philosopher, and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the Danish existentialist thinker. Drawing upon Tabataba’i’s seminal works—*Bidāyat al-Ḥikma*, *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma*, and *Risālat al-Wilāya*—the study explores how identity is rooted in metaphysical dependence on God, emphasizing the inherent poverty (*faqr dhātī*) of human existence and the path toward self-realization through divine proximity. In contrast,

Kierkegaard's writings—particularly *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*—present identity as an existential task of becoming a self before God, where despair and anxiety serve as stages toward authentic existence.

Through a systematic comparative methodology, the article highlights convergences between Tabataba'i's metaphysical ontology and Kierkegaard's existential theology, while also underscoring their divergences in epistemology, anthropology, and soteriology. The findings suggest that both thinkers envision true identity as inseparable from the divine, yet articulate distinct philosophical paths: one through metaphysical gradation of being, the other through existential faith and individual subjectivity. This dialogue not only deepens the understanding of Islamic and Western approaches to identity but also opens new possibilities for contemporary comparative philosophy and interfaith discourse.

Keywords: Identity, Allameh Tabataba'i, Søren Kierkegaard, Comparative Philosophy, Existentialism, Islamic Metaphysics

Introduction

The problem of identity has been a perennial question in the history of philosophy, traversing metaphysical, epistemological, theological, and ethical domains. What it means to “be a self,” to possess a stable or authentic identity, has engaged philosophers across traditions, from the ancient Greeks to modern existentialists, from Islamic metaphysicians to contemporary theologians. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, identity is often framed in terms of ontology and metaphysics: the degree of a being's dependence on, and participation in, the Absolute Reality (*al-Haqq*). In Western existentialism, particularly in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, identity emerges as a dynamic existential task: to become a self before God, through stages of despair, anxiety, and faith. These two frameworks—metaphysical ontology and existential theology—offer complementary yet distinct insights into the question of identity.

This article undertakes a comparative study of identity in the thought of Allameh Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1903–1981) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Allameh Tabataba'i, renowned for his *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* as well as his systematic philosophical works such as *Bidāyat al-Ḥikma* (The Beginning of Wisdom), *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma* (The End of Wisdom), and *Risālat al-Wilāya* (Treatise on Sainthood), stands as a pivotal figure in twentieth-century Islamic philosophy. His philosophical system is deeply rooted in the tradition of Mulla Ṣadrā's *al-Ḥikma al-Muta'aliya* (Transcendent Philosophy), yet is articulated with a modern rigor and clarity that engages both metaphysical and theological questions. For Tabataba'i, human identity is constituted by an essential ontological poverty (*al-faqr al-dhātī*)—a radical dependence on God as Necessary Being—and is realized fully only through spiritual journeying (*sayr wa sulūk*) toward proximity with the Divine (Tabataba'i, 2002).

Søren Kierkegaard, by contrast, is often regarded as the father of existentialism, though his thought is deeply theological and Christocentric. In works such as *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard describes the self as a “relation that relates itself to itself,” a synthesis of the finite and infinite, freedom and necessity, grounded ultimately in God (Kierkegaard, 1980). For Kierkegaard, identity is not a static essence but a task of becoming: the self must pass through despair—understood as a misrelation within the self—in order to attain authentic existence through faith. Unlike Hegel's system, which reduces the individual to a moment of the Absolute Spirit, Kierkegaard emphasizes the singular individual before God as the locus of authentic identity.

At first glance, these two thinkers—an Islamic metaphysician of the twentieth century and a Danish Christian existentialist of the nineteenth century—might appear to belong to wholly different worlds. Yet both converge on the conviction that true identity cannot be understood apart from God. Both resist secular humanist accounts of identity as merely psychological or social construction, insisting

instead on a vertical dimension: the self's grounding in the Divine. Still, their frameworks differ significantly. Tabataba'i emphasizes a metaphysical ontology of gradation of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), in which the self's identity unfolds through ontological dependence and proximity to God. Kierkegaard, by contrast, emphasizes existential inwardness, despair, and the leap of faith as the means by which identity is actualized.

The comparative significance of such a study lies in several dimensions. First, it deepens our understanding of Islamic philosophy's potential dialogue with modern Western thought, especially existentialism. As noted by Nasr (1996) and Rizvi (2009), Islamic philosophy has often been portrayed as pre-modern, but figures like Tabataba'i demonstrate its continued vitality in addressing contemporary questions. Second, it opens a space for comparative philosophy of religion, where Christian and Islamic thinkers are placed in conversation around shared concerns. Third, the study contributes to broader debates on identity in a globalized world, where secular and postmodern theories often dominate, by reasserting the centrality of metaphysical and religious perspectives.

The methodology adopted in this article is comparative and hermeneutical. Following the principles of comparative philosophy (Clarke, 1997; Nicholson, 2009), the aim is not to impose one framework upon the other, but to allow each thinker to speak in his own terms, while highlighting both resonances and divergences. Primary sources form the backbone of the study: for Tabataba'i, *Bidāyat al-Ḥikma*, *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma*, and *Risālat al-Wilāya*; for Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. These are supplemented by secondary scholarship on both thinkers (e.g., Adams, 2005; Caputo, 1993; Nasr, 2006; Rizvi, 2009).

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section examines Tabataba'i's understanding of identity, with attention to his metaphysical principles, particularly the concepts of existence, gradation, and ontological poverty. The second section turns to

Kierkegaard's existential account of identity, focusing on despair, the self, and faith. The third section presents a comparative analysis, highlighting points of convergence—such as the centrality of God and the insufficiency of the autonomous self—and points of divergence—such as the metaphysical versus existential orientations. The article concludes by suggesting how the dialogue between Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard can enrich contemporary philosophical and theological discussions on identity.

By bringing together two thinkers from different traditions yet united by the conviction that identity is inseparable from God, this study aims to demonstrate the fruitfulness of comparative philosophy for addressing perennial human questions. Identity, far from being reducible to social roles or psychological constructs, is here understood as a profound ontological and existential reality that unfolds only in relation to the Divine.

Identity in Allameh Tabataba'i's Philosophy

1. Metaphysical Foundations of Identity

Allameh Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1903–1981) occupies a central position in twentieth-century Islamic philosophy as both an interpreter of the Qur'an and a philosopher in the tradition of Mulla Ṣadrā's *al-Ḥikma al-Muta'aliya* (Transcendent Philosophy). His philosophy of identity is inseparable from his broader metaphysical system, which revolves around the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) and the gradation of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*). In *Bidāyat al-Ḥikma* and *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma*, Tabataba'i reaffirms that existence is not a univocal genus nor an equivocal term, but rather a graded reality, with beings participating in different degrees of ontological intensity (Tabataba'i, 1997; 2002).

Identity, therefore, is not simply a nominal marker or psychological construct; it is ontologically grounded. For Tabataba'i, every

contingent being (*mumkin al-wujūd*) derives its identity from its participation in existence. The human self (*nafs*) is a locus of existence that embodies both material and immaterial dimensions. Unlike modern secular accounts that reduce identity to social recognition or subjective self-construction, Tabataba'i situates identity within the metaphysical framework of dependence upon God, the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*).

Central to this framework is the doctrine of *imkān faqri* (ontological poverty or indigence). Every contingent being is essentially poor, lacking existence in itself, and utterly dependent on God for its being (Tabataba'i, 1983). This radical dependence is not accidental but essential; it constitutes the very identity of the creature. Human identity, then, is nothing apart from this poverty: to exist as human is to be essentially dependent.

2. Ontological Poverty and the Human Self

In his *Risālat al-Wilāya*, Tabataba'i articulates the implications of ontological poverty for understanding the human self. He insists that the self cannot be conceived as an autonomous substance but only as a dependent existent whose essence is rooted in relation to God. Identity is not self-grounded; rather, it is relational and vertical. The Qur'anic verse, "O mankind, you are the poor in need of Allah, while Allah is the Free of need, the Praiseworthy" (Q 35:15), is taken by Tabataba'i as a metaphysical statement, not merely a moral exhortation. Poverty (*faqr*) is the essence of the human being.

In this light, the self's search for identity is not the search for autonomy but the discovery of its essential dependence. Modern existentialist claims about authenticity through self-assertion or self-construction are, from Tabataba'i's perspective, misconceived, because they overlook the metaphysical fact of poverty. True authenticity lies in recognizing and actualizing one's dependence upon God. As Tabataba'i (1983) argues, to deny this poverty is to fall

into illusion (*wahm*) and self-deception, thereby obscuring one's true identity.

Furthermore, Tabataba'i integrates his philosophical anthropology with Qur'anic hermeneutics. In *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, his monumental commentary, he emphasizes that the human being is described in the Qur'an as God's vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth (Q 2:30). This viceregency is not merely political but ontological: the human being bears the imprint of divine attributes in proportion to its capacity. Thus, human identity is simultaneously marked by poverty and dignity, dependence and representation. This duality defines the paradox of human existence: radically poor yet honored by God's bestowal of vicegerency.

3. The Gradation of Being and Identity as Ascent

The doctrine of the gradation of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), inherited from Mulla Ṣadrā but reformulated by Tabataba'i, provides a dynamic account of identity. Existence is a single reality with varying intensities, and the human self participates in this reality with the potential for ascent. Human identity is not static; it can intensify or diminish depending on one's ontological orientation. Through intellectual and spiritual development, the self actualizes higher degrees of being, thereby drawing nearer to God.

This ascent is not merely ethical but ontological. In *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma*, Tabataba'i explains that the perfection of the soul lies in its detachment from material limitations and its orientation toward pure existence (Tabataba'i, 2002). The more the self actualizes immaterial perfections—knowledge, virtue, and love of God—the more it attains a stronger degree of being, and hence, a fuller identity. Conversely, indulgence in vice and material attachment leads to ontological diminishment.

Identity, then, is both given and task: given as ontological poverty, tasked as ontological ascent. The self must actualize its potential for proximity (*qurb*) to God through knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and action (*'amal*). This synthesis of metaphysics and spiritual praxis distinguishes Tabataba'i's account from purely theoretical systems.

4. Identity and the Role of Wilāya (Sainthood)

A distinctive feature of Tabataba'i's philosophy is his integration of *wilāya* (spiritual authority or sainthood) into the account of human identity. In *Risālat al-Wilāya*, he explains that ultimate human identity is realized through attachment to the axis of *wilāya*, which is embodied in the Prophet and the Imams in Shi'i theology (Tabataba'i, 1983). The saint (*walī*) represents the fullest actualization of human potential: a being whose poverty is fully realized as receptivity to divine grace.

For ordinary humans, identity is a journey toward this model. By participating in *wilāya*—through obedience, love, and spiritual following—the believer's self is gradually shaped into its true identity. Thus, identity is not only metaphysical and individual but also communal and theologically grounded. The Qur'anic verse, "Indeed, the friends of Allah—no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve" (Q 10:62), encapsulates the ideal of identity in *wilāya*: security from existential despair through total grounding in God.

5. Epistemological Dimension of Identity

Beyond ontology, Tabataba'i emphasizes the epistemological dimension of identity. Knowledge is not a neutral cognitive activity but a transformative act that reconstitutes the knower's being. In *Bidāyat al-Hikma*, he explains that intellection (*ta'aqqul*) is a mode

of existence that elevates the soul (Tabataba'i, 1997). To know is to become. Thus, epistemology and identity are inseparable: the pursuit of knowledge, especially knowledge of God, is simultaneously the perfection of one's self.

This epistemic view resonates with the Qur'anic emphasis on knowledge as light (*nūr*), as in "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Q 24:35). For Tabataba'i, the ultimate knowledge is not discursive but intuitive and experiential: the direct witnessing (*shuhūd*) of God. This highest form of knowledge perfects identity by uniting the knower with the known in the act of vision.

6. Ethical and Practical Implications

Tabataba'i's account of identity carries profound ethical implications. If identity is ontological poverty and ascent toward God, then ethical life is not merely social convention but the actualization of one's being. Virtue signifies ontological strengthening, while vice entails ontological weakening. This transforms the meaning of morality from external obligation to existential necessity. To act ethically is to become more truly oneself; to act immorally is to diminish one's own identity.

Moreover, this framework offers a critique of modern secular accounts of identity, which often reduce the self to psychological self-assertion, consumer choices, or social roles. For Tabataba'i, such approaches overlook the metaphysical core of human existence. A self that denies its poverty to God may achieve social recognition or psychological satisfaction but remains ontologically deficient.

In summary, Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophy presents identity as:

1. Ontological poverty (*imkān faqri*): human beings are essentially dependent on God.

2. Dynamic ascent (*tashkīk al-wujūd*): identity unfolds through intensification of being.
3. Wilāya: ultimate identity is modeled in sainthood and realized through attachment to the Divine axis.
4. Epistemological transformation: knowledge, especially of God, constitutes the perfection of identity.
5. Ethical necessity: moral action is existentially tied to self-actualization.

Tabataba'i's account thus combines metaphysical depth, Qur'anic grounding, and spiritual praxis, offering a rich vision of human identity that resists reductionist interpretations.

Identity in Kierkegaard's Existential Philosophy

1. Kierkegaard's Project and the Question of Identity

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the Danish philosopher often hailed as the “father of existentialism,” developed a profound account of human identity in the context of modernity's crisis of meaning. Writing under various pseudonyms, Kierkegaard critiqued the Hegelian reduction of individuality into universal categories and the complacency of Christendom, seeking instead to reawaken the individual to the existential task of becoming a self. For Kierkegaard, the human being is not simply given as a finished essence but must *become* a self through a process of existential appropriation.

The problem of identity is therefore at the center of Kierkegaard's thought. In *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, he defines the self as “a relation that relates itself to itself, or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but consists in the relation's

relating itself to itself” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 13). This enigmatic formulation expresses the dynamic, relational, and unstable character of identity.

2. The Dialectic of the Self: Finite and Infinite, Necessity and Possibility

For Kierkegaard, human identity is constituted by a dialectical synthesis:

- Finitude and infinitude: The self is both finite (bound to body, history, society) and infinite (capable of relating to God and transcending temporality).
- Necessity and possibility: The self is determined by conditions it cannot choose (necessity), but it also faces the open horizon of freedom (possibility).

Identity emerges when the self rightly relates these elements in dependence upon God. When the dialectic collapses—when a person is swallowed by finitude (conformism, materialism) or lost in infinitude (dreaming, abstraction)—the self falls into despair. Thus, despair (*fortvivelse*) is not merely psychological depression but the ontological misrelation of the self to itself and to God.

3. Despair as the Failure of Identity

Kierkegaard identifies three main forms of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*:

1. Despair of not being conscious of having a self (ignorance): the individual lives in aesthetic immediacy, immersed in pleasures and distractions, unaware of their deeper identity.

2. Despair of not willing to be oneself: the individual recognizes the self but flees from its burden, conforming to social norms or roles.
3. Despair of willing to be oneself apart from God: the most radical form, where the individual asserts autonomy against God, seeking self-sufficiency.

Each of these forms represents a failure of identity. True selfhood cannot be achieved autonomously; it requires grounding in the “power that established it”—namely, God (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 14).

4. Faith as the Ground of True Identity

If despair is the sickness of the self, faith (*tro*) is the cure. For Kierkegaard, faith is not assent to doctrines but an existential posture: the self's absolute dependence upon God. Only by relating oneself to God does the self find its truth and stability. In this way, Kierkegaard's existential analysis parallels, in a different idiom, Tabataba'i's doctrine of *imkān faqri* (ontological poverty). Both insist that identity is not self-grounded but relational and dependent upon the divine.

Faith transforms the paradox of the self: one becomes finite yet infinite, necessary yet possible, through resting transparently in God. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard illustrates this with Abraham, who, through faith, becomes the “knight of faith,” holding together the paradox of loving Isaac and yet willing to sacrifice him in obedience to God. Abraham's identity is not reducible to ethical universality; it is rooted in his absolute relation to the Absolute.

5. Stages on Life's Way: Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious

Kierkegaard outlines a progression of existential stages that structure the development of identity:

- **Aesthetic stage:** The individual seeks identity through pleasure, novelty, and immediacy. This stage corresponds to inauthentic existence.
- **Ethical stage:** The individual recognizes responsibility and attempts to ground identity through moral self-determination. Yet without God, this stage leads to despair, as the self remains self-reliant.
- **Religious stage:** The highest stage, where the self surrenders autonomy and entrusts its existence to God in faith. True identity is realized only here.

This progression reveals that human identity is not static but a task of becoming, culminating in the religious stage. Kierkegaard insists that every individual must confront this existential journey; no mediation through culture, society, or even the church can substitute for the individual's leap of faith.

6. Identity as Subjectivity and Passion

Kierkegaard's famous dictum that "truth is subjectivity" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 203) is often misunderstood. He does not mean that truth is relative but that the appropriation of truth is existential. Identity is formed not by abstract knowledge but by passionate inwardness. To be a self is not to possess objective facts but to live truth subjectively in relation to God.

This emphasis on passion contrasts with rationalist or systematic philosophies that dissolve individuality into concepts. For

Kierkegaard, identity cannot be captured in a Hegelian dialectic or metaphysical schema; it is lived, suffered, and enacted in existential commitment.

7. Ethical and Social Dimensions of Identity

Although Kierkegaard prioritizes individuality, his philosophy does not neglect ethical and social life. In the ethical stage, the self assumes responsibility within social relations, yet its ultimate grounding lies beyond society. Kierkegaard critiques the “crowd” (*mængden*) as untruth, because it tempts individuals to lose themselves in anonymity. True identity requires standing alone before God.

Nevertheless, this does not entail isolationism; rather, it means that authentic participation in community can occur only when grounded in God. In *Works of Love* (1847), Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christian love (*agape*)—grounded in God’s command—frees individuals from self-interest and enables authentic relationships. Thus, identity is both solitary (before God) and communal (through love).

8. The Modern Relevance of Kierkegaard’s Account

Kierkegaard’s analysis of identity resonates strongly in modern contexts marked by secularization, consumerism, and fragmentation of self. His insistence that identity is not a possession but a task, not self-sufficient but dependent, provides a critique of both nihilistic despair and autonomous individualism.

In particular, his concept of despair parallels contemporary notions of alienation, while his emphasis on faith as relational dependence challenges the modern idol of autonomy. Thus, Kierkegaard remains

a prophetic voice, calling modern individuals back to the religious grounding of identity.

In Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, identity is:

1. Dialectical: constituted by finitude and infinitude, necessity and possibility.
2. Precarious: always threatened by despair, the misrelation of the self.
3. Dependent: grounded only in God, not in autonomy or society.
4. Dynamic: a task of becoming, progressing through stages of existence.
5. Passionate: truth and identity are lived subjectively, not abstractly.

Kierkegaard thus offers a rich existential account of identity that complements and contrasts with Tabataba'i's metaphysical account. Both converge on the necessity of dependence upon God but differ in their philosophical idioms: Tabataba'i through ontological gradation and wilāya, Kierkegaard through existential dialectic and faith.

Comparative Analysis of Identity in Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard

1. Methodological Considerations in Comparative Philosophy

Comparative philosophy seeks not merely to juxtapose two traditions but to create a dialogue where their concepts illuminate one another. In comparing Allameh Tabataba'i and Søren Kierkegaard, we are not collapsing Islamic metaphysics into Christian existentialism, nor vice versa. Instead, we investigate how each thinker approaches the universal human question of identity from distinct intellectual horizons.

Both philosophers wrestle with the nature of human existence before God, yet their vocabularies differ: Tabataba'i employs the metaphysical categories of *wujūd* (existence), *imkān* (contingency), and *wilāya* (spiritual guardianship), while Kierkegaard employs existential categories of despair, anxiety, and faith. A comparative lens reveals convergences and divergences, offering a richer understanding of the nature of selfhood.

2. Convergence I: Identity as Dependent upon God

Both Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard emphasize that the human self is not autonomous. For Tabataba'i, the principle of *imkān faqri* (ontological poverty) teaches that every contingent being exists only by dependence on the Necessary Being (God). Human identity is thus a participation in existence that belongs properly to God (Tabataba'i, *Nihāyat al-Hikma*, 1997, p. 45).

Kierkegaard similarly insists that the self “is grounded transparently in the power that established it” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 1980, p. 14). The failure to acknowledge this dependence is despair. In both traditions, authentic identity arises only in acknowledging and embracing dependence upon God.

3. Convergence II: The Journey Toward Authentic Selfhood

Tabataba'i's *Risālat al-Wilāya* portrays the human journey as one of gradual spiritual perfection, wherein the soul ascends toward proximity to God through purification and the reception of divine guidance. The end of this path is *wilāya*, a state of union with divine knowledge and authority.

Kierkegaard, though using different imagery, similarly conceives identity as a journey: the individual passes through stages (aesthetic,

ethical, religious) culminating in the leap of faith, where the self entrusts itself fully to God. Both depict identity as dynamic, developmental, and requiring transformation.

4. Convergence III: Identity and Subjectivity Before God

A striking parallel lies in the emphasis on direct relationship with God. Kierkegaard criticizes “the crowd” as untruth and insists that true identity emerges only in standing alone before God. Tabataba’i, though less individualistic, similarly emphasizes that ultimate realization comes through personal recognition of *faqr* and receptivity to divine illumination, not merely external conformity.

This convergence underscores that both thinkers prioritize the personal, existential dimension of identity over mere social or formal belonging.

5. Divergence I: Metaphysical vs. Existential Frameworks

The first major divergence lies in philosophical methodology.

- Tabataba’i operates within the metaphysical tradition of Islamic philosophy. His analysis of identity emerges from graded existence (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), causality, and divine ontological dependence. Identity is a metaphysical fact before it becomes an existential challenge.
- Kierkegaard, by contrast, avoids speculative metaphysics, focusing instead on existential psychology and theology. Identity is first experienced as despair and anxiety, not deduced from ontological categories.

Thus, Tabataba'i provides a rational metaphysical account of identity, while Kierkegaard provides a phenomenological-existential one.

6. Divergence II: Communal vs. Individual Dimensions

In Tabataba'i's framework, identity is inseparable from the Islamic community and the chain of spiritual guardianship (*wilāya*). The perfected human (*insān kāmil*) functions not only individually but as a guide for society. Identity has a communal and cosmic dimension, oriented toward collective guidance.

Kierkegaard, however, privileges individuality. He resists the mediating role of Christendom, insisting that each person must stand in solitude before God. While he acknowledges ethical and communal relations through love, his primary concern is the solitary individual.

This contrast reflects broader differences between Islamic metaphysical anthropology and Protestant existential theology.

7. Divergence III: Modes of Attaining Authenticity

For Tabataba'i, authenticity is attained through intellectual contemplation (*'aql*), moral purification, and spiritual ascent. Knowledge of God is achieved via rational demonstration (*burhān*), then deepened through mystical unveiling. His approach integrates reason, revelation, and spiritual practice.

For Kierkegaard, authenticity is attained not through rational demonstration but through the "leap of faith." No syllogism can compel identity; it requires a passionate existential commitment.

Hence, while Tabataba'i trusts in rational metaphysics to guide the seeker, Kierkegaard distrusts reason and elevates paradox.

8. Divergence IV: Anthropology of Sin vs. Ontology of Poverty

Kierkegaard frames the failure of identity primarily in terms of *sin*—the willful refusal to be grounded in God. Despair is ultimately a form of sin. His anthropology is theological-existential.

Tabataba'i, by contrast, frames the failure of identity in ontological terms: human beings are *poor in essence* (*faqīr dhātan*) and fall into error when they ignore this metaphysical dependence. His anthropology is ontological-metaphysical.

Though both stress dependence on God, Kierkegaard sees alienation as sin, Tabataba'i as forgetfulness of ontological truth.

9. Comparative Synthesis

Despite differences, both philosophers converge on the thesis that identity is only authentic when related to God. This convergence is philosophically significant: two thinkers from distinct traditions independently affirm that selfhood cannot be grounded in autonomy, society, or materiality, but only in the divine.

Their divergences enrich the dialogue:

- Tabataba'i brings metaphysical rigor, providing ontological justification for dependence.
- Kierkegaard brings existential immediacy, describing the lived experience of despair and faith.

Together, they provide a multidimensional account of identity: both metaphysically grounded and existentially experienced.

10. Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary philosophy and theology, identity is often reduced to psychological, sociological, or political categories. The dialogue between Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard challenges this reductionism by restoring the transcendent dimension.

- For interfaith dialogue, this comparison shows that Islamic metaphysics and Christian existentialism, despite differences, share deep commitments to divine-centered identity.
- For philosophical anthropology, the comparison offers a corrective to secular humanism by insisting that human beings are not autonomous selves but beings-in-relation-to-God.
- For modern existential crises, from alienation to consumerism, these thinkers remind us that authenticity cannot be achieved by self-construction but only through divine grounding.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard reveals both a shared insight and divergent approaches: identity is fundamentally dependent on God, yet the path toward this realization is articulated either through metaphysical ontology or existential theology. This dialogue demonstrates the potential of comparative philosophy to illuminate universal questions of human existence while respecting the integrity of distinct traditions.

1. Summary of Findings

This study has undertaken a comparative exploration of identity in the thought of Allameh Tabataba'i and Søren Kierkegaard, two philosophers from distinct intellectual and religious traditions. Despite differences in methodology, vocabulary, and context, the research has revealed remarkable convergences in their conceptions of authentic selfhood.

- For Tabataba'i, identity is fundamentally ontological: the human being is a contingent existent (*mumkin al-wujūd*) whose reality is grounded in the Necessary Being. Authentic selfhood emerges when this dependence is consciously acknowledged and lived through intellectual contemplation, spiritual purification, and realization of *faqr* (essential poverty).
- For Kierkegaard, identity is fundamentally existential: the human being is a synthesis of the finite and infinite, which becomes authentic only when grounded transparently in God. Failure to recognize this dependence results in despair, while faith represents the leap into authentic existence.

The comparative analysis demonstrated convergences—especially the dependence of selfhood on God and the transformative journey toward authenticity—as well as divergences, such as Tabataba'i's metaphysical framework versus Kierkegaard's existential one, and the communal versus individual dimensions of identity.

2. Philosophical and Theological Implications

2.1. Re-centering the Divine in Identity Discourse

In contemporary philosophy, identity is often reduced to sociological constructs (ethnicity, gender, culture) or psychological categories (self-esteem, personal narrative). The dialogue between Tabataba'i

and Kierkegaard challenges these reductions by re-centering God as the essential ground of selfhood. Without this divine orientation, identity becomes fragmented and fragile.

2.2. Complementarity of Ontological and Existential Approaches

The juxtaposition of Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard suggests that metaphysical and existential accounts of identity are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Tabataba'i provides the ontological grounding—a rational account of why identity must be dependent upon God—while Kierkegaard provides the existential description of how this dependence is experienced in the lived reality of despair, anxiety, and faith. Together, they offer a more holistic vision of identity.

2.3. Ethical and Communal Dimensions

Tabataba'i's insistence on the communal and cosmic dimension of identity—especially through *wilāya*—balances Kierkegaard's emphasis on individuality. In a world struggling with both hyper-individualism and collectivist pressures, this dialogue invites us to think of identity as both personal and relational, rooted in God but extending to society through love, justice, and spiritual guidance.

3. Contemporary Relevance

3.1. Interfaith Dialogue

The comparative study demonstrates that despite theological and cultural differences, Islamic metaphysics and Christian existentialism converge on the principle that human beings cannot

achieve authentic identity apart from God. This common ground provides a fertile basis for interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians, not merely in doctrinal terms but in addressing the shared existential anxieties of modern humanity.

3.2. Addressing the Crisis of Modern Identity

The modern condition, marked by secularism, consumerism, and relativism, often leaves individuals in states of alienation. Kierkegaard's notion of despair and Tabataba'i's concept of ontological forgetfulness both describe aspects of this condition. Their solutions—faithful commitment and metaphysical recognition of dependence—offer resources for addressing the identity crises of our age.

3.3. Academic Contribution

By bringing together two figures rarely studied side by side, this research contributes to the growing field of comparative philosophy of religion. It shows how insights from Islamic metaphysics and Christian existentialism can mutually illuminate, enriching both traditions and offering new tools for global philosophical discourse.

4. Limitations and Further Research

This study has focused on identity in the works of Tabataba'i and Kierkegaard but has not exhausted their rich legacies. Future research may extend the comparison by:

- Examining Mullā Ṣadrā's metaphysics of substantial motion in dialogue with Kierkegaard's dynamic view of selfhood.

- Exploring Kierkegaard's emphasis on Christ and the paradox of incarnation alongside Tabataba'i's reflections on prophecy and *wilāya*.
- Investigating the practical implications of their views for modern social and political philosophy.

5. Concluding Statement

In conclusion, both Allameh Tabataba'i and Søren Kierkegaard affirm, from their distinct traditions, that human identity is not self-grounded but God-grounded. Authenticity is realized only in acknowledging dependence upon the Divine—whether expressed as *imkān faqri* or the leap of faith. Their dialogue across traditions offers not only a profound philosophical insight but also a timely reminder that the quest for identity, in every age, ultimately leads back to God.

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