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## The Concept of Happiness in the Philosophy of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi

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*Nasireddin Tusi Felsefesinde Mutluluk Kavramı*

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the concept of happiness as one of the main human values. The author shows the study of human happiness in the historical assessment of medieval Muslim philosophy, analyses the concept using the example of the philosophical concept of happiness of the great Azerbaijani thinker Nasir al-Din al-Tusi. To understand the real concept of happiness of Tusi, firstly it needs to plunge into the historical era of the period and the life path of the philosopher. The opinions of the thinker about happiness are analyzed in the framework of his book “Akhlaqi-Nasir” (“Nasirean ethics”), which has been considered a source of morality and ethics in the Middle East for centuries. Tusi emphasized comprehensive opinions, ethical and philosophical ideas about man, family, society, morality, religion and social relations. The book also contains interesting ideas about human happiness, which are analyzed and compared in terms of that period by the author.

**Keywords:** Islam, happiness, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, Akhlaq-i Nasiri, ethics.



## Introduction

Human life is a natural pursuit of happiness. It is associated with a feeling of constant satisfaction, positive emotional state, a sense of well-being and hope, spiritual harmony, absence of anxiety and fears. The happiness can be looked through from three aspects: past, now, future. What makes us happy in the *past* in general comes from the influence of temperament, personality and heritage. We can be happy *now* because of external factors, including the place we live, the quality of education, the level of income, social welfare, what people we communicate with, what activities we choose. The things that make us happy about the *future* are the goals we set for ourselves, what lifestyle we lead, which successes we expect.

It is one of the main topics of humanitarian knowledge from antiquity to the present day. The concept of happiness was perceived by ancient philosophers as the main branch of hierarchy of values. For this reason, the problem of happiness interested many thinkers and it had a large number of different, sometimes conflicting approaches.

Scientists identify a variety of approaches in the study of human happiness. Let us consider three most applied approaches: the psychology of happiness, the axiology of happiness, and the sociology of happiness. The first of these approaches considers happiness as an experience. Incidentally, it is customary to consider happiness a problem of scientific psychology up to day in Western philosophy. In axiological terms, happiness is “value, a measure of goodness in a person’s life, the ideal of the perfection of personality and being in general”. The sociology of happiness considers this concept as a public good, as well as the definition and significance of these philosophical categories from a social point of view. These ideas existed in all ages, they can be found in the philosophical views of many thinkers from antiquity to the present day, from Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus to contemporary philosophers. (Комарова: 56)

Greek and Western philosophers comprehend differently the concept of happiness. Aristotle defines happiness as living well and doing well and seeking happiness is the final end. As for Arius, he defines happiness as the best things in one’s life or the greatest of one’s goods or the most important. For Epicurus, happiness is the pleasant life which can be achieved by avoiding distress and desires for things beyond one’s basic needs.



Bodily pleasure and mental delight and peace are the possessions to be sought in life. However, one should judge all these matters by measuring together and looking at the advantages and disadvantages, for we make use of the good on some occasions as a bad thing, and the bad, conversely, as a good. (Sabjan, 2019: 398)

### Happiness from Islamic Perspective

All religions of the world talk about such a spiritual state of a person as happiness. Happiness from an Islamic point of view is, first of all, satisfaction. Islam teaches us to be happy and positive, to see only the good. Islam is a religion of optimism and happiness, for Allah gives us joy of soul and body in this world and in the next world.

We all know that the world has always been built on hardship. This is divine wisdom and man, as the highest being in the life, is advancing towards his Creator in the midst of these difficulties. (“We have certainly created man into hardship”, Holy Quran, Surah Al-Balad, 90:4) It needs to be optimistic about the events that are happening to you to be happy in life. And the only way to be optimistic is to be a believer. The word faith also means peace and tranquillity. Not every kind of faith can make a person happy, happiness requires true, strong and pure faith in the heart. It is noteworthy to look through some verses of the Holy Quran: “As to the Righteous, they will be in Gardens, and in Happiness” (Surah At-Tur, 52:17), “So keep your duty to Allah as best you can, and listen, and obey, and spend; that is better for your souls. And those who are saved from his own greed, such are the successful” (Surah At-Taghabun, 64:16), “Indeed, those who believe and do righteous deeds – for them are the Gardens of Pleasure” (Surah Luqman, 31:8) and so on.

From Islamic perspective, happiness is expressed by the term *sa'ādah*. The term *sa'ādah* is related to two dimensions of existence: the hereafter and the present world. In the case of the hereafter, *sa'ādah* indicates a meaning of an ultimate form of happiness, which is everlasting contentment and bliss, the highest vision of God, promised to those, who in the worldly life, have submitted themselves sincerely to serve God by obeying His commands, and avoiding His prohibitions. The present world, on the other hand, is related to three things: (1) to the self, such as conduct pertaining



to knowledge and good character, (2) to the body, such as good health and security, and (3) to things external to the self and the body, such as wealth and other attributes. Based on the explanation above, it is clear that happiness affects not only our secular and regular life; in fact, it cannot be separated from the spiritual aspects of our existence as interpreted and guided by religion. (Sabjan, 2019: 397)

Literally “happiness” means a state of feeling, differing from pleasure by its suggestion of permanence, depth and serenity, whereas sa‘ādah is a comprehensive concept, including in it happiness, prosperity, success, perfection, blessedness and beatitude. (Ansari, 1963: 319) It is a true belief, high morality, health, a bright mind, a sense of dignity, a thankful life with a combination of satisfying the needs of the soul and body. The one who acquired all these qualities found happiness, attained perfection. Muslim scholars have agreed that Islamic law has five purposes: to protect religion, life, reason, property and honour.

Al-Ghazali thinks happiness “continuity without end, joy without sorrow, knowledge without ignorance, richness without poverty, perfection without deficiency, and fame without shame”. But Miskawayh refuses to define the essential character of such an ideal, he thinks that we cannot know perfectly the nature of happiness, only being able to indicate it remotely and understand or explain by symbols. Highest degree of happiness can be bodily and spiritually in the state of having sufficient energy, optimism, confidence, fortitude, equanimity, non-conformity or independence and self-contentment. (Omar: 8-9) Al-Kindi approaches happiness as the perfection and freedom from pain. Al-Farabi addresses the concept of happiness more systematically than other any medieval Islamic philosophers and called happiness the highest degree of human perfection and anyone who chooses to obtain it for himself must have a path and the means that allow him to arrive it. (Contreras-Vejar, Jen, Turner (Eds), 2019: 175-177)

### **The Way to Happiness**

The first article is devoted the concept of ideal man, the second - the concept of ideal family, the third - the concept of ideal society. Thus, he determines three main, unchangeable and constant composition of the state. (*Adabül-Mütəəllimin*, 2002: 8)

One of the main issues that Tusi tries to explain in the first article is



the issue of “good” and “happiness” (sa’ādah). Firstly, the author states that every deed has a purpose, and this purpose is the desire to achieve “goodness” and “happiness”. Then he reveals the content of the concepts of “good” and “happiness”, shows their kinds, and interprets the differences between the ancient philosophers on this issue. According to Tusi, who propagate labor, activity, movement, and diligence throughout his work, “happiness” is possible as a result of conscious labor, which he substantiates with various scientific arguments and he does not consider unconscious, ready-made achievements as real “happiness”. Therefore, true happiness can be achieved through the intense activity of the mental mind.

Following the Muslim ethical tradition, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi regards ultimate happiness as the supreme moral end, which thought of spiritual nature is primarily realised through the strict observance of moral discipline. Tusi insists that it is the result primarily of reflection on the principle of Divine Unity which indeed is the principle of cosmic harmony and injustice. (Sheikh, 1969: 74) It is noted in *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* that human spiritual needs and forces, honour of virtue are provided and controlled through thought, reason, consciousness, and will. The key to man's happiness and unhappiness, the steering wheel of perfection and imperfection, has been given to the solution of his mind and will. If he moves in the right, consistent, practical, straightforward way, and gradually masters science, culture, knowledge, and wisdom, his innate talent that is capable of evolution, will exceed the limits and elevate him from one degree to another, from one level to another. He will reach the goal he desires, to the highest point where the divine light shines, and he will include those close to God in the ranks. (Abbasov & Həsənov, 2012: 178-179)

It is obvious from these words that Tusi was calling for change and development. He believed that if a person sat in his innate position, if he could not control his will, his will would drag him down like a stone rolled from top to bottom, then it would lead to an increase of his indecent behavior, and, in a short time it will sink into the deepest abyss of humiliation, and this will be its most terrible end.

Human happiness, according to Tusi, consists of three components; bodily, spiritual and social. If one of them is missing, a person cannot be considered happy in the full sense of the word. It is very valuable that Tusi



does not separate the individual from the public, he concludes that the most important moral duty of everyone is his desire for the general welfare, for the welfare of the people. Greatness, in his opinion, does not at all lie in eating, getting drunk, dressing up and generally leading an idle lifestyle, but in serving his people, protecting his friends and neighbours from grief and sorrow, for “peace is so arranged that everyone needs the help of other people in the security and well-being of themselves and their offspring”. An individual needs the help of the society and therefore cannot live far from the society. (ГЕЮШЕВ, 1968: 118)

When human being reaches the level of knowing the degrees of perfection in the universe as a whole, it begins to comprehend the innumerable details of this universe. If the man can take action and put them into practice, the whole world will serve these actions to realize. Perhaps he will become a world himself, he will justify the name “micro world” given to him as a metaphor for the “macro world”, and he will definitely rise to the level of an absolute human being. His complete absoluteness is manifested in his attainment of eternal bliss, ascension to the position of his temple, and acceptance of its virtues, after which he attains the honour of joining the ranks of the relatives of God, which is the highest and greatest happiness for man. (*Əxlaqi-Nasiri*, 2005: 60)

Miskawayh noted in “*Kitab al-Saadab*” as follows: Everything that exists has some purpose for which it has been created or made. This fact is most clear in the objects of art. No instrument or object of art is without purpose. At the same time, no object or instrument can completely fulfil the purpose of any other object. Nature is prior to art; it is the original which art imitates. Nature produces nothing that is without purpose. Everything in whole or part, the body or its various organs, has some purpose that is different from the others. This law is even more prominent in the working of the soul, which is superior to Nature. (Ansari, 1963: 323) Tusi make this statement continue that every act has a purpose in the section “On the goodness and happiness”. He emphasized that there must be a purpose in perfecting the human soul. As mentioned earlier, this goal is for goodness and happiness. In this case, first of all, it is necessary to explain the essence of the concepts of “goodness” and “happiness” to create the desire to achieve perfection by understanding the imperfections, and



to act to fulfil this desire, to increase enthusiasm as success is achieved, to strengthen the belief in mastering perfection and achieving goals. If a wise person does not imagine what are the goodness and happiness, the result of the perfection, he will not think of possessing the perfection, and he will not be able to attain goodness and happiness unless he possesses it.

It should be noted that ancient philosophers said that there are two types of goodness: absolute and relative. Absolute good is the ultimate goal of all beings and all desires. Relative good refers to things that have benefits in some way. "Happiness" is like goodness, but everyone has his own happiness, and this perfection can be achieved through the will and conscious activity. According to Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, so the happiness of one person is not the happiness of another. But the goodness is the same for everyone. Some have also used the term "happiness" in reference to animals, in fact, this term can only be used figuratively about them, because animals reach their perfection not through mind and consciousness, but through their innate talents. It means that the blessings that some animals receive, such as food and drink, comfort and tranquillity, are not true happiness, but such coincidences or good fortune. It happens to people as well. However, the reason why we say that absolute goodness belongs to everyone is that here every action is directed to the same goal, every action is directed to the same desire. When there is a goal, a person has an idea of what to do, and aimless work is foolishness. If the goal is good by nature, it is absolute good. If it leads to something better later, it is called "relative good". Second good deed is called "absolute good". So, when we say "absolute good", we mean deeds that are good for everyone. Everyone should strive to learn and develop it, pay little attention to the deeds that are good for only himself, avoid mistakes, not consider those who are not good as good, and reach the level of absolute good and close to it.

Firstly, Tusi, speaking of pleasures, did not limit them only to bodily pleasures, he attached exceptionally great importance to spiritual satisfaction, without which he could not imagine true pleasure. Secondly, Tusi declares that pleasure must be connected to the reason. In his interpretation, pleasure is the knowledge and attainment of what is good and perfect. Spiritual pleasures are stronger than bodily, sensual ones. As you can see, these thoughts are, to a certain extent, consonant with the teachings of



Epicurus, who, declaring pleasure as the basis of his ethics, considered spiritual pleasure above bodily pleasure. Tusi insisted that true happiness is achieved only by reason and is expressed mainly in spiritual and moral satisfaction. The greatness of man, his power and difference from other animals lies precisely in the fact that he perceives and changes the world, creates for himself the means of living and satisfies not only his physical but also moral needs. The person who cannot control his feelings and passions, and turns into their slave, loses his humanity and loses the high rank of a person. (Гейшнев, 1968: 117)

### **Kinds of Happiness**

Nasir al-Din al-Tusi became acquainted with the ideas of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and others about "happiness" and summarized them as follows: wisdom, courage, morality and justice. Possessing these virtues is enough to attain "happiness", and there is no need for other bodily virtues. But mental illness, keeps the will from its characteristic activity, confuses the mind leading to perfection, and corrupts the mind. (*Əxlaqi-Nasiri*, 2005: 69)

Everyone has their own path to happiness; there is no universal key that opens this door. Some think that wealth is happiness, others think that the enjoyment of sensible pleasure is happiness, some think that the power to rule is happiness, others think that knowledge is happiness, still others think that happiness resides in other things. Each one is convinced that what he considers to be absolute happiness is the most preferable, the greatest, and the most perfect good – such is the rank happiness holds among the good. (Contreras-Vejar, Jen, Turner (Eds), 2019: 177) Nasir al-Din al-Tusi refers the opinion of Aristotle that he points out that everyone's happiness depends on different cases, for example, the poor - in wealth, the sick - in health and wellness, the unknown - in glory and fame, the greedy - in feast, the passionate - in pleasure and lust, the hatred- - in revenge and enmity, the beloved – coming together and love, scientist - in science and culture, etc. He found it necessary, through his wisdom, to classify "happiness" in a way that would be acceptable for each mind. That is why wisdom needs art, profession and property to manifest itself. If the great Creator has given the people any art, science, this is true happiness. This is the root of generosity, liberality, and kindness in people. However,





it applies to a perfect person who has fully formed himself as a personality. Happiness is to realize the truth. This is the highest degree of virtue that human beings can acquire by imitating their Creator.

If a person creates an amazing work, the pleasure he receives from his own creation will be absolute pleasure, joy will be real, pure, spotless. At that moment, the love in his heart awakens. Philosophers said that true felicity elevates its owner from imperfection to perfection, from disease to health, and from humiliation to virtue. (*Ḍḡlaqi-Nasiri*, 2005: 79)

Doing a good deed is like the rising of the sun behind a cloud, it has a different beauty. It is not a sign of rudeness or indifference, but a sign of persistent will, high spirit, great generosity and indomitable pride. It is the most beautiful character! He classifies the pleasures and goals of happiness as follows: 1. The nature of passion, its ultimate goal is will of lust; 2. The nature of virtue, its ultimate goal is will of anger; 3. The nature of wisdom, its ultimate goal is the will of intellect. Wisdom is the most perfect of all natures, for it contains both pleasure and grace. It is stable, and everyone gets whatever he wants: a righteous man - justice, a philosopher - wisdom, and a virtuous man - virtue. (*Ḍḡlaqi-Nasiri*, 2005: 78)

### Conclusion

To sum up Tusi's statements for happiness: people have a goal in achieving any success, and although this path is difficult, it is possible to achieve happiness after achieving what you want in the end. Spiritual pleasure is not pleasant at first, one wants to avoid it at the beginning, it needs the patience, labor, toil, will and activity. After mastering it, beauty, merit, necessity, value, honor and virtue appear, and then a spiritual pleasure emerges, the most delicious of all pleasures, the goodness of the destiny, the goodness of the Hereafter will be obvious. Therefore, people need to be educated first by their parents, then by the rules of the Shariah, and then by the purification of morals and beliefs, and attain wisdom. If they reach wisdom, they will be considered happy. The pleasure of happiness is also an active pleasure. Just as passive pleasure is the result of receiving, accepting, and so active pleasure is the result of giving, forgiving, and spending. The pleasure of a good calligrapher is in writing, the pleasure of a good singer is in singing, so the pleasure of happiness is in kindness and generosity. As the wealth and treasure of the world decreases by sharing, and the



more wisdom increases by sharing. As the science and wisdom expand, it creates many opportunities for improvements. While the material substance is in danger of burning, sinking, and being plundered, the spiritual state as wisdom has no danger for losses. (*Əxlaqi-Nasiri*, 2005: 80)

In the end of section, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi emphasizes that there is disagreement among philosophers as to whether happiness is praised or not. Philosophers think that things that have reached the end of their virtues cannot be praised, but other things can be praised in relation to them. For example, those who are in the service of great Creator are absolutely blessed, all of which are among the blessings of His holy being, because to praise something is to affirm that it is superior to something. The essence and quality of the Great Creator are beyond all praise. So, they cannot praise Him, they can like Him. Happiness is also free from praise, but it can be liked. Things that can make people happy can be praised, for example, they praise and glorify "justice" because it can bring happiness.

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**Öz:** Makale, mutluluk kavramını temel insani değerlerden biri olarak ele alıyor. Yazar, ortaçağ Müslüman felsefesinin tarihsel değerlendirmesinde mutluluk kavramını araştırıyor, büyük Azerbaycanlı düşünür Nasireddin Tusi'nin felsefi mutluluk kavramı örneğini kullanarak analiz ediyor. Tusi'nin gerçek mutluluk kavramını anlamak için öncelikle dönemin tarihsel çağını ve filozofun yaşam yolunu dikkatle incelemek gerekir. Yüzyıllardır Ortadoğu'da ahlak kaynağı sayılan "Ahlak-ı Nasırı" adlı kitabın çerçevesinde düşünürün mutluluk hakkındaki görüşleri analiz ediliyor. Tusi, insan, aile, toplum, ahlak, din ve sosyal ilişkiler hakkında kapsamlı görüşlere, etik ve felsefi fikirlere vurgu yaptı. Kitap aynı zamanda yazar tarafından o dönem açısından incelenen ve karşılaştırılan insan mutluluğu hakkında ilginç ve bilgilendirici fikirler de sunuyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İslam, mutluluk, Nasireddin Tusi, Akhlak-ı-Nasırı, ahlak.



