

Happiness

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Introduction

This article aims to define and explain the concept of happiness (*sa'ādah*) from Imam Ali's (a) point of view. From his perspective, although happiness consists of factors such as wealth, beauty, and fame that are not completely in our hands, we have a say in regard to the most important factors of happiness, such as ethical virtues and intellectual and religious values. In the words of Imam Ali (a), there is a special emphasis on the role that the unseen factor of *tawfiq* plays in one's happiness.

Happiness or salvation is the name people place for their final goal in life. Despite their consensus with regard to the term itself, there is much dispute with regard to its definition. According to Aristotle, some consider it to be taking pleasure, others regard it to be enjoying social positions and honor, and philosophers believe it to be rational activity and contemplation. Moreover, one person can have different descriptions of happiness in different situations. For example,

happiness may be defined by health when the definer is sick and as wealth when he is poor.

At all events, the difficulty of observing the true essence of happiness should not hold us back from embarking on this journey, because making effort to reach happiness without understanding it will never bring us closer to it.

One of the most controversial issues in regard to happiness in Philosophy of Ethics is whether or not happiness is comprised of a number of factors. This issue is especially discussed with regard to Aristotle's theory in this field. William Hardy was the first to employ the terms "inclusive end" and "dominant end" to refer to this issue which is discussed by Philosophers of Ethics. According to the "Inclusive End" theory, happiness consists of more than one independent factor. However, according to the "Dominant End" theory, it is only one thing that brings happiness and everything else is simply a means or medium in reaching that factor.

It is sometimes argued that Aristotle believed in the "Dominant End" theory and considered the only factor of happiness to be contemplating the truths of existence. Therefore, even embracing ethical virtues are only valuable when it helps in this regard.

From amongst the great Islamic scholars, Farabi and Avicenna believed in the Inclusive End theory, because, from their viewpoint, happiness only lies in creating a connection with the "active intellect" and observing the world of *Malakut*. Consequently, anything else is only valuable when helpful in reaching this goal.

Conversely, some scholars believe that Aristotle is an advocate of the Dominant End theory, because, according to them, he views happiness consisting of two or more independent factors. These scholars consider these factors to be ethical and intellectual activity.

One may consider Imam Ali's (a) viewpoint as an interpretation of the inclusive end theory, because it is understood from his words that happiness is comprised of many independent factors, in the sense that with the absence of each of them, one's happiness is not complete.

Below, we will briefly examine and discuss these factors starting from the less important.

Factors of Happiness from Imam Ali's (a) Viewpoint

1. External Goods

Some of the sayings of Imam Ali (a) regarding the roots of happiness hint to what Aristotle named as "external goods," by which he meant advantages such as wealth, beauty, fame, and social position that are external to one's soul and character, over which one has no control.

Imam Ali (a) speaks of beauty as one of the external goods to be the lowest level of happiness:

الصورة الجميله اقل السعادتين

The beautiful face is the lesser happiness. (Khansari 1366 Sh, 2:22)

He also refers to beauty as the starting point of happiness:

حسن الصورة اول السعادة

The beauty of face is the beginning of happiness. (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 325)

In regard to fame, he says that one's happiness is being praised and hailed by others:

عنوان صحيفة السعيد حسن الثناء عليه

The title of the record of the happy man is a nice praise for him. (Majlisi 1403AH, 75:79)

There are other traditions that consider having a beautiful or handsome spouse or having a vast house as factors of happiness.

One of the most important external goods is an appropriate social environment to live in. Even if one lives with complete convenience, when he sees his friends and family in pain, he will not be happy. Imam Ali (a) says,

ما سعد من شقى اخوانه

One whose brothers are miserable will not be happy. (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 425)

The reason why Aristotle and great Islamic philosophers like Farabi discuss politics right after their discussion about ethics and happiness, may be that in their viewpoint one's happiness is dependent on the happiness of the society, which is the subject of the science of politics.

In Imam Ali's (a) words, financial stability is considered as factor of happiness; He calls poverty "the greatest death" (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 362) and the combination of debt and poverty "the greater misery" (Majlisi 1403AH, 69:45).

At all events, one can conclude that external goods play an independent role in one's happiness, even though their importance is extremely low compared to other factors of happiness.

Many interesting points are mentioned in the traditions pertaining to external goods that we will leave for future studies.

Ethical Virtues

Ethical virtues are an important factor in one's happiness. Aristotle's definition of virtue limits it to emotional and mental attributes that are well-established in one's character, but other thinkers expand it to include one's actions as well.

On the other hand, according to early Greek philosophers, virtues are of no religious nature and do not cover factors such as belief, submission to God, or trusting in Him. In their writings, virtue refers to a category of acts and attributes that are of ethical value regardless of religion's point of view, even though religion may also introduce them as virtues. Virtues such as bravery, modesty, and justice are the main categories of virtue when defined in this way.

Thomas Aquinas and other theist scientists use the term "holy virtues" to refer to those virtues that do not fall under the above-mentioned definition. Holy virtues are only depicted in a religious context. Believing in God is the most prominent of holy virtues that is only understood in the context of understanding God. Other holy virtues have a similar situation.

In this section, we will briefly explain the role of certain ethical virtues in one's happiness based on Imam Ali's (a) words and lifestyle.

1. Justice

Justice can have two meanings, a general meaning and a narrower one.

In its broader sense, justice means obeying the law which leads to all ethical virtues. According to this definition, justice itself is not one of ethical virtues; rather, it encompasses all virtues.

However, according to the narrower sense, justice means distributing economic and social advantages fairly or punishing those who violate other people's rights.

Presumably, the greatest aspect of Imam Ali's (a) life was his practice of justice. He was an extraordinary worshipper, but at the same time a brave warrior that held no fear of war. He was so compassionate that he could not bear the weeping of an orphan. When he was in power, he strictly practiced justice in distributing wealth, to the extent that some of the Prophet's (s) close companions and his own brother were dissatisfied.

A group of Imam Ali's (a) followers suggested to him that should distribute the treasury based on people's social status, so that they would not get displeased and cause problems for his government. Upon hearing these words, the Imam (a) said,

Do you command me that I should seek support by oppressing those over whom I have been placed? By Allah, I will not do so as long as the world goes on, and as long as one star leads another in the sky. Even if it were my property, I would have distributed it equally among them, then why not when the property is that of Allah. (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 26)

When it came to holding people accountable for breaking the law, his conduct was the foremost example of justice. Any person who is even slightly familiar with history praises his guidelines in regard to respecting the rights of his murderer:

O sons of 'Abd al-Mutallib! Let there be no retaliation for the act of my murder. Do not roam about with a drawn sword and with the slogan "Amir al-Mu'minin is killed," and do not start the massacre of my opponents and enemies. See to it that only one

man, that is my assassin, is killed, as the punishment of the crime of murder is death and nobody else is molested. The punishment to the man who attempted the murder shall take place only when I die of the wound delivered by him, and this punishment shall be only one stroke of sword to end his life. He should not be tortured before his death, his hands and feet should not be amputated, because I have heard the Holy Prophet [s] saying, "Do not amputate hands and feet of anybody, be it a biting dog." (Nahj al-balagha, letter 47)

The reason why Imam Ali (a) strictly practiced justice was that he was aware of the role it played in the progress, happiness, and salvation of individuals and the society as a whole. When he was asked whether justice is preferred or generosity, contrary to what most people would answer, he considered justice to be preferred, because justice is the base of social and political order and can bring about happiness and salvation for individuals and the society together, whereas generosity alters the natural flow of the society (Mutahhari 2008, 16:435-8).

From Imam Ali's (a) point of view, practicing justice is of such importance that it constitutes an essential attribute of the God-wary; an attribute whose realization is contingent upon deliverance from the chains of desire:

قد الزم نفسه العدل فكان اول عدله نفى الهوى عن نفسه

He has enjoined upon himself [to follow] justice. The first step of his justice is the rejection of desires from his heart. (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 87)

Unlike most people, Imam Ali (a) spoke less and strived to practice more, but even his short comments in this regard contain of many insightful points.

2. Patience

Patience is a great virtue that is at the same time the base for many other ethical virtues, such as chastity and braveness. Imam Ali (a) has described patience metaphorically as the head of faith:

و عليكم بالصبر، فان الصبر من الايمان كالراس من الجسد و لا خير في جسد لا
راس معه و لا في ايمان لا صبر معه

And you should practice patience, because patience is for faith what the head is for the body, so that just as there is no good in a body without the head there is no good in faith without endurance. (Nahj al-balagha, wisdom 82)

The Imam (a) taught that eternal rest and peace lies in being patient in the short number of years one lives:

صبروا اياما قصيرة اعقبتهم راحة طويلة

They endured [hardship] for a short while, and in consequence they secured comfort for a long time. (Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 193)

He taught that refraining from useless speech (*samt*) is a means for achieving salvation and happiness. He warned us that to unleash our worldly desires is a great threat that one must strictly refrain from.

الصبر ظفر، العجل خطر

Patience is victory, hastiness is danger. (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 283)

3. Truthfulness

Truthfulness is usually attributed to a speech that is in accord with reality, but, in a broader meaning, it can also be attributed to actions. Truthfulness in its original meaning is the ethical virtue which opposes lying and dishonesty. However, in its broader meaning, its value is defined in relation to whatever it is attributed to; that is to say, a positive act, when done truthfully, is of greater value.

Imam Ali (a) regards truthfulness as leading to salvation and lying as the cause of misery (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 86). It is only through truthfulness that one can reach salvation:

بالصدق تكون النجاة

On honesty depends salvation. (Khansari 1366 Sh, 218)

Also according to the Imam (a), the more one is truthful, the closer he is to salvation (Khansari 1366 Sh, 218).

Up until now we mentioned examples of ethical virtues that play a role in one's happiness from Imam Ali's (a) viewpoint. Obviously, in case of further research, one can recognize other examples. The traditions that speak of the detrimental effects of negative attributes on one's fate are also important in this discussion. For instance, the Imam (a) mentions that jealousy ruins one's life" (Khansari 1366 Sh, 300), greed leads to misery (295), and pride and being captivated by unstoppable desires is misery (311).

Therefore, ethical virtues can be considered an important factor of happiness from Imam Ali's (a) viewpoint.

Intellectual Virtue

Contemplating the divine aspect of existence is the very intellectual activity that Aristotle has considered the only factor of happiness. What led him to this viewpoint was the way humans function. He argues that what makes man significant amongst other creatures is the ability to think and contemplate. Man eats, but plants also eat and grow; man has emotions, but so do animals. However, man can think and contemplate, especially about the unseen and the purpose of existence, whereas no other creature has such ability. Therefore, we must define man's happiness according to what makes him significant, and that is contemplation. When an intellect is strong enough to think of metaphysical beings, it has been freed from worldly and material bonds and has become similar to metaphysical beings.

Aristotle strives to open a window to move towards God within his theory of intellectual activity. This point has attracted the attention of Christian and Muslim philosophers and caused them to praise his theory.

Thus, Avicenna quotes the Prophet (s) as saying to Imam Ali (a),

يا علي إذا رأيت الناس يتقربون إلى خالقهم بأنواع البر تقرب إليه بأنواع العقل
تسبقهم

O Ali! When you see people seek closeness to God by carrying out different good deeds, seek closeness to Him by different forms of rationality, so that you pass them. (Avicenna 1352 AH, 15)

Imam Ali (a) teaches that “no wealth is equal to the intellect” (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 51), and that “when intellect is lively and strong, it brings along salvation” (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 53).

The following sentences are one of Imam Ali’s (a) finest ways of describing the role of contemplation in one’s happiness:

قَدْ أَحْيَا عَقْلَهُ، وَأَمَاتَ نَفْسَهُ، حَتَّى دَقَّ جَلِيلُهُ، وَلَطْفَ غَلِيظُهُ، وَبَرَقَ لَهُ لَامِعٌ كَثِيرٌ
الْبَرْقِ، فَأَبَانَ لَهُ الطَّرِيقَ، وَسَلَكَ بِهِ السَّبِيلَ، وَتَدَا فَعَتَهُ الْأَبْوَابُ إِلَى بَابِ السَّلَامَةِ،
وَدَارِ الْأَقَامَةِ، وَتَبَيَّتْ رِجْلَاهُ بِطُمَأْنِينَةٍ بَدَنِهِ فِي قَرَارِ الْأَمْنِ وَالرَّاحَةِ، بِمَا اسْتَعْمَلَ
قَلْبَهُ، وَأَرْضَى رَبَّهُ

He has revived his intellect and has destroyed his ego, to the point where the thicknesses of his [body] has turned thin and the toughness of his [soul] has softened. A bright light was kindled for him, which illuminated his path and led him on his way. He was constantly taken from one door to another until he reached the door of peace and the house of dwelling, His feet and his confident body became fixed in the station of safety and comfort. All of this is because he employed his heart and pleased his Lord. (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 220)

It is from this perspective that Imam Ali (a) considers the absence of intellect misery (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 55) and deems ignorance as the worst of calamities (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 73).

Religious Virtues

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, another element of happiness in the words of Imam Ali (a) is possessing religious virtues.

Without any doubt, the greatest religious virtue is holding the true belief. Regardless of the lengthy discussions pertaining to the essence

of belief and its results, there is a consensus in regard to its unique effect on one's happiness. In this regard, Imam Ali (a) mentions that "salvation is dependent on belief (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 87), "with belief one can reach the pinnacle of happiness and joy" (89), and "belief is safety" (88).

One of the finest descriptions of the Quran in this regard is the following verse:

يا ايها الذين آمنوا هل ادلكم على تجارة تنجيكم من عذاب اليم تومنون بالله و
رسوله و تجاهدون في سبيل الله باموالكم و انفسكم، ذلكم خير لكم ان كنتم
تعلمون

O you who have faith! Shall I show you a deal that will deliver you from a painful punishment? Have faith in Allah and His Apostle, and wage jihad in the way of Allah with your possessions and your persons. That is better for you, should you know. (Quran 61:10-11)

Belief is necessary but not enough. One must make the best use of belief, and that is to prepare the ground for it to translate into actions and deeds. The seed of belief will only grow when enhanced by good deeds. God has promised that people who believe and carry out good deeds will achieve salvation and be saved from the misery that threatens the unrighteous.

When explaining the importance of belief in the happiness of the society, Imam Ali (a) mentions that the absence of belief on a social scale is a means of misery and ignorance (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 2). When the intellectual and emotional principles of faith are destroyed and the manifestations of belief are denied in a society, there is no hope for salvation and happiness.

It is on this basis that Imam Ali (a) teaches that religion is the most wanted thing for man (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 84), God-wariness shows the way of salvation (271), worshipping is a means of victory [in the competition for salvation] (198), and, despite its tough appearance, abstinence is a great investment and means of salvation (276).

Regarding the significance of faith, Imam Ali (a) says that “no one will be afflicted with [eternal] misery except through disobeying God (183) and that “salvation comes with faith” (88).

From Imam Ali’s (a) viewpoint, the key to happiness is faith, , because in the worldview of the Imam (a), humans come from and will return to God and only by maintaining intimacy with God can man revive his true self and reach salvation. The faith that the Imam (a) speaks of is different from contemplating divine existence, which Aristotle considers as the sole factor of happiness. In Imam Ali’s (a) perspective, along with the intellect, emotions, feelings, and complete submission to God are also crucial in attaining true happiness.

Finally, we must shed light on two points:

What was mentioned about the contribution of external goods, such as wealth and fame, to one’s happiness was based on the apparent relation drawn between them and happiness in the traditions. However, these traditions may be taken to indicate a conditional relation and that the external goods are means of happiness only if they lead to or enhance one’s faith, ethical virtues, and intellectual values. Consequently, it may be argued that external goods are only means of reaching happiness and not its essential elements; for instance, money is valuable if it leads to greater generosity or if it brings about peace of mind for contemplation, and if one could reach ethical and religious virtues without external goods, they would be of no essence.

At any rates, even if we side with the apparent meaning of these traditions and conclude that external goods are also a factor of happiness, their value is not comparable to that of the other factors. Therefore, it is clear that when possessing external goods is against ethical and religious virtues, one must opt for the latter. This point is obvious and needs no further explanation. Who can doubt that when Imam Husayn (a) was suffering from the different calamities in Karbala he was not the most successful person? This is because he possessed the other factors of happiness.

1. From amongst the factors of happiness, achieving external goods is not totally in our hands, and as the Imam (a) states,

الدنيا بالاتفاق و الاخرة بالاستحقاق

This world is [attained] by accident, but the Hereafter is [achieved] by worthiness. (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 148)

It seems that because of this point, words related to happiness in different languages have a link to fate and luck. For example, in Farsi happiness is called نیک بختی ("having good luck") and in English happiness is derived from the root word *hap*, which denotes coming about by chance.

However, most factors of happiness, like ethical and religious virtues are at all people's disposal, but we must not forget that there is a special emphasis in the words of Imam Ali (a) on the unseen factor of *tawfiq* (i.e. divine help for success):

التوفيق قائد الصلاح و التوفيق راس سعادة

Tawfiq leads to goodness and is the most important factor of happiness. (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 203)

However, it is important to note that *tawfiq* is not an arbitrary factor; it is only achieved when one makes effort and strives to carry out good deeds, as Shahid Mutahhari says,

If one truly seeks the truth and strives to have sincerity and carry out good deeds, he will be supported by the Truth in this world ... Not only is this a teaching of the Prophets (a), but is also an issue that individuals experience themselves. Therefore, whoever desires to see the help and assistance of God in his life must strive and make effort. And how pleasurable is it to make a deal with God and watch the manifestations of His grace and mercy. (Mutahhari 2008, 3:348)

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