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Part 2: Happiness

The question of happiness is one of the oldest of the philosophical topics of mankind, which belongs to the field of practical philosophy. The learned men of ethics and sociology are engaged in the discussion of its nature, conditions, causes, barriers, and its inconsistencies; and if the question of happiness and adversity is raised in speculative philosophy and theology, it is related to one of the minor points of this problem, that is, whether happiness (as well as adversity) is confined to the physical and material, or it is of the following two types:

- (i) Physical and material happiness
- (ii) Spiritual and mental happiness

Theologians propound this question for this reason that they wish to prove spiritual and mental happiness and adversity to be much greater and more considerable.

Bu-Ali (Avicenna) in section eight of "Esharat", and Sard-ol-mot'ale-hin in vol.4 of "Asfar", in propounding this matter, consider only this branch of the question of happiness, and have disregarded other aspects of it. On the other hand, we have not so far come across a comprehensive discussion of this topic in Islamic and non-Islamic books of philosophy.

Although what the reader meets in this essay cannot be considered a complete discussion of this topic, yet it may be regarded as a brief survey. The questions raised here are as follows:

- 1 – What is happiness?
- 2– Happiness and pleasure
- 3– Is man by nature desirous of happiness?
- 4 – Happiness and aspiration.
- 5 – Happiness and satisfaction.

6 – A social discourse.

7 – Types of happiness.

8 – Stages of happiness.

9 – Factors and causes of happiness.

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At first both happiness and adversity seem to be clear in meaning, and if there is an ambiguity and difficulty, it is related to other problems, for, if you ask anyone whether he desires happiness, he will without hesitation give an affirmative answer. And if you ask:

"What about adversity?" you will undoubtedly hear a negative answer. No one pauses before this question, and no one says: "Explain the meaning of happiness and adversity first, so that I may see which one I desire," Therefore, it is evident that both happiness and adversity have a clear meaning for all people, and so they are among the matters which need no definitions.

But I should say that it is not enough to suppose that happiness needs no definition. Many ideas seem like that at first, but as soon as we employ the Socratic Method, and compare that meaning with other meanings which are close to it and analyse it, we see that clarity gradually gives its place to a kind of ambiguity and indefiniteness.

Happiness is for many people synonymous with pleasure, tranquility, success, attainment of desires, joy, satisfaction with the course of events and similar others. But as soon as we compare happiness with each of these, we see that those are appropriate in meaning, yet these ideas are not quite the same. Therefore, it is necessary first to make their comparisons so that later on during these comparisons we find a definite meaning for happiness.

There is no need to discuss the literal root of happiness and pleasure, to see whether happiness is used in its special cases with the meaning of assistance, so that a happy person may supposedly be one who is helped by the turn of the world, while adversity may be considered its opposite, or that word has from the beginning had the senses of distress, pain and misfortune, while happiness was taken to mean its opposite, that is, freedom from pain and hardship.

Apparently from a lexicological point of view, we cannot find two opposite meanings for these two words, but in their general and particular usage they are placed on opposite sides, as they are so in the case of the Qur'an:

"A day will come when no one speaks without His permission, and some are fortunate and some

unfortunate; those who are unfortunate groan in the fire... while those who are fortunate are in heaven." (11: 104-5).

Happiness and Pleasure

Happiness and pleasure are very close together (like adversity and pain) but they are not synonymous and securing pleasure is not the same as attaining happiness. In the same way bearing pain is not absolutely adversity, for a pleasure may be followed by a greater pain, as a pain may be the prelude to a greater and more important pleasure. It is also possible that getting a pleasure causes greater and more important pleasures to be lost, or a pain prevents greater and more severe pains.

In all these cases the reality of pain and pleasure is preserved, that is, we should not suppose that a pleasure which prevents a greater pleasure, or causes a greater pain is no longer a pleasure. But such a pleasure is not happiness. In the same way a pain which is the prelude to a greater pleasure or checks a greater pain must not be viewed adversely.

Happiness is applied to something the attainment of which causes no regret, and adversity is tolerating something which cannot by any means be accounted for; that is, man has adopted the sense of happiness for his final desire, and adversity for its opposite point, namely, what he should always avoid.

In other words, happiness is man's unconditional wish, and adversity is his unconditional abhorrence. Therefore, if a person or a faith or school claims bringing happiness to mankind, it means: "What I claim to show direction for, is not something better than which could be supposed." But pleasure is not so. If someone claims giving a pleasure, whether it involves a greater pain or the loss of a greater pleasure the case is different.

Pleasure is related to a special power and ability of men or animals, but happiness depends on the whole powers and abilities and living aspects of man. Pleasure is the ruler of the pleasant and unpleasant, while happiness is the ruler of what is advisable and inadvisable. Pleasure is related to the present, while happiness extends equally over the present and future. Pleasure as well as pain are related independently to every aspect of man's life, while happiness is an overall matter.

For this reason it is easy to distinguish pleasure and pain, while it is very difficult and sometimes impossible to distinguish happiness and its opposite. A psychologist who recognizes only mental processes, is able to express an opinion about pain and pleasure, while expressing an opinion about happiness and adversity is a philosopher's concern, since he claims to know the world, the society and man. The kind of opinion of that philosopher about happiness and adversity completely depends on his knowledge of men and of the world. For this reason the suggestions of philosophers about happiness are so very much different from one another. One of them considers happiness as securing pleasure, while another thinks it to be abandoning pleasure and killing the will.

Someone pays attention to material things, and another to the spiritual. One of them considers this moment important, and another chooses far-sightedness as his motto. But as pleasure and pain are the special products of the self, they are subject to investigation and testing, and it is easy to reach unanimity of opinion about them.

The reason why people, in spite of their claim that they desire happiness, follow different goals and choose different ways of attaining them, is this that they differ in the personal way of thinking or their attachment to a particular school or faith concerning man and the world. There is also another reason for this, which will be discussed in the question as to whether happiness is absolute or relative.

Is Man by Nature Desirous of Happiness?

The difference which we mentioned between happiness and pleasure shows that pleasure is one-sided and happiness many-sided. Pleasure is one aspect of the self's special product and subject to the conscience, while happiness is a general and independent matter which is obtained by the comparison and calculation of all pains and pleasures.

The idea of happiness has occurred to man by his ability to compare pains and pleasures and study their various aspects, and adopt a way of securing greater and better pleasure and enjoyment on the whole and reduce to naught all pains and sufferings. But pleasure is a mental state, depending on the mildness of something or a power, or an ability or a human organ. So, pleasure and pain are distinguished by nature and instinct.

But instinct and nature do not distinguish happiness and adversity; this is done by intellect. Whether intellect directly claims to make this distinction or guide man to the faith or school which leads to happiness, anyhow the act of distinguishing happiness is not instinctive.

Therefore, when it is said that everyone is by nature desirous of happiness and always seeks it, it is not true. What people seek is pleasure. We can say someone seeks happiness, whether he chooses the right way or not, only when he makes a proper calculation and compares the losses and benefits and chooses a way from among them .

So, in answer to this question as to whether man by nature desires happiness, it must be said that if it is meant that all people always run after lost happiness, but only they often err in their distinction, it is not right, for, people often follow their nature, not their intellect , and desire pleasure, not happiness. And if it is meant that if human intellect distinguished his happiness and naturally sought it, it would be a correct statement.

Happiness and Aspiration

Certainly everyone has a number of wishes and has a great desire to attain them. If he is asked to

describe in what things his happiness lies in order to attain them, he would present his needs and aspirations.

Some people suppose that happiness is the attainment of aspirations and success in desires, and whoever reached them all has attained perfect happiness, and he who has not attained any of them is quite unhappy; or he who attained some of his aspirations, has to the same extent secured some happiness in that shape of its. Thus, he has not only not been treated unfairly, but has also been granted benefits as a member of an unfortunate class.

But we may say that happiness is the attainment of maximum possible enjoyments and the banishment of maximum pains or minimizing them. In other words, happiness is derived from an harmonious use of one's material and intellectual resources, in the process of overcoming any situational obstacles and contradictions leading to pain and suffering.

This assumes, of course, that one is aware of his inborn abilities and is able to recognize the possibility of using the same, as provided for in the natural order of the world of creation. In this context, it is notable that sometimes an exploited or weak section of people may decide that they are happy with the material advantages that their exploiters find it necessary to extend to them.

Actually, their happiness cannot be real while they allow themselves to be exploited by the shrewd opportunists and self-seekers. The injustice that is caused in this way is much more tragic than that produced by dissatisfaction, for, the injustice that is felt by the other party, is like a painful illness which compels a patient to seek a remedy, but an injustice like the above is like a painless sickness which prevents the patient from seeking a remedy.

The maximum service rendered by the well-to-do class to the weaker class is to have removed their sufferings by means of creating satisfaction in them, but happiness is not only freedom from suffering; it is not the negation of pain, but securing overall joys, benefits and pleasures. As it was said, such sufferings cannot be compared with physical pains like eye-ache and toothache, and in any case their removal may not be thought a service. Such sufferings are the means of social awakening and alertness, and their diminution in this respect is another sin and crime.

Types of Happiness

If we attribute happiness to man who is a combination of body and spirit, there is only one type of it. But if we suppose body and spirit as something separate, then, there are two types of happiness: physical and spiritual. Physical happiness is the overall and complete attainment of physical pleasures with regard to the duration, intensity, strength or weakness of pleasures and the maximum banishment of physical pains. Spiritual happiness is the overall and perfect attainment of spiritual pleasures and the maximum removal of spiritual pains.

We may also separate the happiness of each organ from that of the other organs, and divide it on the basis of each power and organ, such as the happiness of sight, hearing, reason, etc. However, in any case, happiness is different from pleasure. Happiness of sight is different from the pleasure of sight.

Something may give pleasure to the eye, but as it may involve a loss to the eye, it cannot be considered happiness. Unlike pleasure, when we attribute happiness to anything, whether it is to man, body or spirit or an organ, we must not ignore its overall significance.

Stages of Happiness

Pain and pleasure, which are the main bases of adversity and happiness, respectively, have stages. Their impact differs from individual to individual. Individual differences in feeling pleasure, or perceiving it, are evident not only in physiological satisfaction and enjoyment, but in intellectual, aesthetic and religious perceptions. Human beings are created with naturally different capabilities and talents. Accordingly, the degree and stages of happiness are different, and individuals do not attain the same level of happiness. Moreover, external factors which give activity to talents or check pains and sufferings are not equal for all people. So, happiness which depends on these factors will be different. Happiness is an overall attainment.

This overall attainment may take place in a perfect manner and to its utmost limit or it may be otherwise. For this reason there appear stages and degrees of happiness.

What we have explained so far shows that happiness is wholly dependent on the motion and evolutionary course and human attainment of perfections for which he has potentiality. So happiness is related to perfection, but motion and movement are not in themselves perfection but the means of attaining perfection, that is happiness. Happiness and perfection are of the same order.

Now we can approach a higher meaning of happiness, and consider happiness and essence as fellow-riders. Each creature in proportion to his capacity for development enjoys happiness. This capacity for development is proportionate to his proximity to the descending or ascending curve to the everlasting source and origin of existence, and human beings benefit from happiness in proportion to their proximity to this origin, and suffer from adversity in proportion to their remoteness from it. The ability of man for attaining happiness with all its various manifestations consists of his ability to attain Divine proximity.

Factors of Happiness

One of the important topics especially from a practical point of view are the factors of happiness.

There are a number of questions here, such as those which follow:

1) Do factors which make man really happy exist at all, or is happiness only a dream and fancy? Are pain and suffering and adversity and their causes the only things that are created in this world? A great

number of ancient and modern philosophers of the world who have adopted cynicism, think so.

Obviously this way of thinking is by no means in harmony with divine philosophy, and no such people can be found among theological philosophers, while material philosophy has produced a great many such people. But this is not a place to discuss this point.

2) Is the factor of happiness only one thing which must be found, or does it depend on several factors?

3) Is that factor (or factors) inherent in human existence itself or in the external world where it should be secured? Or is one part of the factors internal and another part external?

If all those factors or some of them are inherent in human nature, are they in his body and in his physical powers, or in his spirit and spiritual powers? Or are some parts in his body, and some in his spirit?

These are among numerous questions which lend themselves to discussion, and about which much has been said, and briefly all of them ask: "Where is the source of happiness?"

As we know, some have claimed that happiness must be sought within oneself. Most of these thinkers consider happiness freedom from pains, and believe that contamination with the external world produces pains and sufferings, and the more one frees oneself from the external world, and severs one's relation with it, the more one benefits from happiness, which is nothing but deliverance from pain.

In Indian philosophy and mysticism and Buddha's thoughts, as well as in the philosophy of Greek cynical philosophers the most famous of whom is Diogenes, and in the teachings of Manes and his followers we come across such ideas.

Unfortunately this way of thinking which is the product of philosophical cynicism and quite contrary to Islamic monotheism has, as a result of association with and propagation of the ideas of nations accustomed to them become prevalent among the Muslims under the name of asceticism, piety, renunciation of the world or even Sufism, and take such a root that it is supposed to be an Islamic necessity by some ignorant people.

Another group considers the source of happiness to be the external world, and say that man is a part of the world, and is influenced by its forces, and it is for this reason that he continues to live and enjoy its pleasures – what man possesses of his own is poverty and need. Pleasure is produced by a kind of nervous susceptibility and reaction against some material actors, such as the reaction produced by optic nerves at seeing, or those of the mouth, tongue and digestive organs at contact with food, or the sense of touch at the mutual touch of a man and woman. The only thing that can be said to be produced internally in a human being is pain and suffering caused by insufficiency of food or other deficiencies.

In the opinion of this group, happiness depends wholly on external factors, but adversity may have an internal cause produced by the shortage of material necessities, or it may have an external cause, such as the pain one suffers at being beaten or imprisoned or by the usurpation of his rights. That is what

materialists believe about the factors of happiness.

There is a third view, and that is that a belief in thinking happiness to be only due to internal or external factors is an exaggeration. Man is built so that he cannot do without external factors and attain perfection and happiness without their aid (or in philosophical terminology, man is not independent of the essence and its interior¹). Nor is he so subsidiary and parasitical that all his joys should be provided from without. In his spiritual interior a man has centres of pleasure which, if he can exploit, are much richer and greater than material centres. It should be wrong to assume that pleasure is solely produced by material nervous reactions. There may be pleasures which have no external or nervous root, and no connection with external material factors either.

Here we cannot refute or accept this claim or give reasons, but spiritual scholars hold this view. Great Gnostics have tried to introduce such pleasures, and to consider material pleasures as trifling compared with them. In their opinion, man is such an original creature that he is able to make himself a centre of pleasure and a boundless sea of happiness.

Mowlavi in introducing this centre and hinting that the external sources of pleasure are trifling and nothing against this great fountain-head and ocean of the interior, addresses him who seeks pleasure in wine and drinking, and says:

"What do you wish to make of self with all that sea?
What non-existence do you seek with all that existence?
You are happy and good and a mine of every joy, Why do you, then, beg favor of wine?
What is wine, or coition or music, From which you seek joy and benefit?
Are you seeking knowledge from unworthy books?
Are you seeking taste from the sweetmeat of bran? Man is the essence and the world a form,
All are shadow and subsidiary, but you the purpose.
When did the sun beg a particle for a loan?
When did Venus beg a vat for a cup?
You are a soul without joy, imprisoned by inebriation,
And a sun jailed by perplexity; what a pity!"

Most of the learned men of the world consider happiness related to both internal and external factors, though there is a great difference of opinion concerning the degree of the value and influence of the factors.

Aristotle has divided these factors into three kinds: external, physical and spiritual. each of which has been limited to three subsidiary factors:

1 – External factors: Wealth, rank, family and tribe.

2 – Physical factors: Health, strength, beauty.

3 – Spiritual factors: Wisdom, justice, courage.

Obviously the factors of happiness cannot be confined to the above ones, and in each of the three factors, other factors may be mentioned such as the social environment suitable for progress, freedom, security, favorable natural and geographical conditions, fine race, children, worthy consort, sincere friends all of which are external factors; then there are a good voice, work, good deeds which are physical factors; and lastly there are faith, noble sentiments, mental health, a strong will, artistic and technical talents etc.. which are spiritual factors.

There are some factors common between the body and spirit, such as worship, and some, like books, which are common to all the three main factors.

An Overview of a Series of Discussions

There are a number of other topics, which will not be discussed here to avoid lengthy explanation, such as the value and degree of the influence factors, namely which one is of the first rank and which one is of the second rank; in other words, the percentage of each: one percent, ten percent, or more?

Another point is, which factor is basic for happiness which cannot be done without, and which one is not basic, which may add to the perfection of happiness, yet its absence does not change happiness into adversity?

Still another point is, which of these factors are direct and which indirect, that is factor of factors?

Furthermore, are these factors changeable or constant? Is something which has at one time been a factor of happiness for men, has always been and will always be so, or is it possible for it to be a factor of happiness in one era or period, and in another era a factor of adversity?

Is it possible to have a comprehensive plan of happiness for man, even through revelation and prophethood, to be adequate for all times? Or is this fundamentally impossible? Those who are against religion have offered this argument and have claimed that, in the past, religions have been the factors of the happiness and progress of mankind, but in the present era, unlike the past, they have been factors of misfortune, retardation and decadence. This topic is worthy of attention and investigation from the view point of Islam, especially as a last religion the injunctions of which are offered for all times.

There is no doubt that some factors of happiness are changeable, in the same way that some others are constant. But a criterion must be found to see which is changeable and which constant. Can it be said that direct factors are constant, and indirect ones changeable and that the laws of happiness, in so far as they are related to direct factors, are unchangeable and when they are related to determining factors, they are changeable? If we wished to continue this discussion in connection with Islamic rules, we would have a long chapter before us.

Another question is whether happiness is absolute or relative. Is something which creates happiness exactly the same for all individuals, all nations, every zone and every race, or must they be different for individuals or at least for nations, zones and races due to differences in their ways of thinking, habits and bodily and mental structures?

Is it possible to have one single law for the entire world, all individuals, all nations and zones equally productive of happiness or not? This subject too is extraordinarily noteworthy in its application to Islamic rules.

These are the topics for which we are compelled to offer only a panorama; otherwise a book will hardly be adequate to do justice to them.

Does Man Need Guidance to Attain Happiness?

If happiness consisted only of pleasure, and adversity of pain, and if both pains and pleasures were confined to limited physical pains and pleasures within the bounds that an animal has of which it is instinctively aware parallel with its natural and bodily growth, there would be no need for guidance. Again, if human needs were limited to at least what he himself could understand through his intelligence and knowledge and thus obtain a panorama of his happiness and distinguish it, it would be enough for him to follow his way gradually through knowledge, technique, development of civilisation and collaboration.

But happiness is not only a question of instinctive pains and pleasures. Neither is it a number of noticeable needs such as illnesses or insecurities which might allow us to say that man will eventually, by his endeavour, find the way of safety and secure the means of happiness. The needs are not limited to one or two.

The most obscure fact for man is man himself and his inherent talents and potential abilities. With all the great progress man has made in Science and industry, and in spite of all the discoveries made in the world of the solid, plants and living creatures, man is still an unknown quantity.

Mankind is now able to agree on the physical constitution of an atom and on the nature of outer space. Views on problems concerning the atom or outer space are identical everywhere, including in the Soviet Union and the United States. However there is no agreement as yet on the question of what constitutes happiness and the way man should choose to attain perfect happiness. The differences that existed in the minds of the scholars and philosophers twenty-five centuries ago on such questions still exist why?

Because the interior of the atom has been recognized, but man is still unknown. Preparing a plan for human happiness depends on the recognition of all the talents, capacities and accomplishments of man and his evolutionary process, all of which lead to infinity. Is happiness anything but the blossoming of all talents, and filling up of all capacities and activity of all powers and following the direct way which takes

man to the highest peaks of existence?

On the other hand, can it be agreed that if such a great need exists, the lack of fulfillment of which would cause perplexity or even the destruction of mankind, would the great and regular system of Creation which always exhibits its master pieces in the way of needs, accept such a vacuum, and ignore this need, and refuse to guide mankind from the horizon which is beyond human foresight, that is, the horizon of revelation, through chaste and well-prepared individuals, for spiritual enlightenment?

Avicenna says at the end of his book An-Nejat (Salvation):

"The need of mankind for a man who can guide it with supernatural aid is much greater for human survival than that of eyelashes created for the eyelids, or eyebrows for the eyes, or for the hollows on the sole of the feet or similar other things which are in themselves useful, but do not represent any special or urgent necessity for their creation."

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