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**THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF HAPPINESS IN ISLAM  
AN OVERVIEW**

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***Abstract***

For decades, man have struggled to define the ethics and the truth about the concept of mankind. In doing this, they have come up with various arguments and views, some of which are applicable and some are noticeably vague and full of irrationality. The discussion of the concept of mankind becomes crucial when it comes to the question of happiness. Indeed, many philosophers have tried to identify happiness based on their own thoughts and perspectives. Needless to say, some of the ideas seem rigid and inexplicable despite many efforts to clarify it. The question of happiness has long been discussed by Islam. The discourse on it is located invariably the Qur'an, Hadith and the commentaries of *ulamā'*. In the context of this paper, the discussion will be based on how Islam explicitly evaluates the meaning and experience of happiness from the ethical perspectives. Two main sources will be employed in order to discuss this topic, namely the thoughts and arguments of al-Ghazālī and al-Attas. In addition, various Western perspectives will also be studied vis-à-vis the subject matter. It is hoped that the paper will provide sufficient discussion about the concept of happiness and its characteristics as well as being useful to contemporary scholars in developing further the discipline of Moral Philosophy besides being a minor contribution to the scholars the world over in understanding the concept of happiness.

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**Keywords:** Happiness, pleasure, ethics, soul, character.



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## 1. Introduction

From Islamic perspective, happiness is expressed by the term *sa'ādah*. The term contrary to *sa'ādah* is *shaqāwah*, which generally conveys the meaning of great misfortune and misery. The term *sa'ādah* is related to two dimensions of existence: the hereafter (*ukhrawiyah*) and the present world (*dunyawiyah*).

The term *sa'ādah* has a close relation to both 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. In other words, they observe the tenets of Islamic teachings.

The present world, on the other hand, is related to three things: (1) to the self (*nafsiyyah*), such as conduct pertaining to knowledge and good character, (2). to the body (*badaniyyah*), such as good health and security, and (3) to things external to the self and the body (*khārijīyyah*), 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. This spiritual existence is derived from the revelation according to al-Attas (1995, p.91-92).

According to Al-Attas (1998, Semester III 97/98) it is necessary to identify *shaqāwah* first in order to get a clear understanding of the *sa'ādah* in Islam. *Shaqāwah* conveys a general meaning of 'great misfortune', 'distress', 'misery', 'disquietude', 'despair', 'the adversity', 'straitened of circumstances' and 'suffering'. It is from the *shaqāwah*, its constituent elements such as *khawf* (fear of the unknown), *huzn* (grief, sorrow, sadness, roughness of soul), *dhank* (narrowness, straitened), *hasrat* (profound grief and regret for something gone and never to be experienced again) and similar emotions were derived from.

In the application of the Quran, the meaning of *shaqāwah* in its various conjugated forms such as *shaqā*, *yashqā*, *tashqā*, *shaqiyy* and *shiqwah* also relate partly to the hereafter, partly to this world and some even to both. All of them according to al-Attas (1995, p.102-103) undoubtedly refer to those who turn away from God and reject His guidance. In short, it is clear to us that *shaqāwah* brings misery to human's life. This sense of 'despair' can happen to anybody who keeps disregard the commands of God and always behaving in a manner that God has prohibited.

On the contrary, al-Attas (1995) opines the *sa'ādah* implies that if a man with his self-consciousness truly submit himself to God by following His guidance and commands, he will then be granted with boundless happiness. This can be achieved through virtuous sense of *imān* or faith that will lead him to ultimate happiness starting from the very present world that he lives in and continue in the hereafter.

## 2. Problem Statement

Greek and Western philosophers however comprehend differently the concept of happiness. Thus, in order to explore further the concept of happiness, it is noteworthy to discuss some of the Western perspectives on this concept. It is worth to start with the views of some of the Greek philosophers like Aristotle, Arius and Epicurus. According to Annas (1993, p. 43-44) Aristotle defines happiness (*eudaimonia*) as living well and doing well and seeking *eudaimonia* 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. Annas (1993, p.43-44) then gives his reformulation of Aristotle's ethics. He opines that since the final good is not the

fulfilment of bodily and external goods, but living according to virtue, therefore happiness is an activity (*energeia*) in accordance with virtue in actions that are preferred, as one would wish them. Bodily and external goods are called productive of happiness by contributing towards it when present; but those who think that they fulfil (*sumplēroun*) happiness, do not know that happiness is life and life is the fulfilment of (*sumpeplērōtai*) action. No bodily or external goods is in itself an action or in general an activity (Shaw, 1996).

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 (MacKinnon, 1995). Annas (1993) proposes that at a man's final end, happiness is in fact a pleasure. Since this pleasure is the primary aim and is innate to us-for that reason, we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater annoyance follows for us from them and we judge many pains superior to pleasures, when greater pleasure follows along for us when we endure the pains for a long time. Every pleasure, therefore, because of having nature, which is familiar to us (*oikeian*) is a good, but not every pain is always natural to be avoided. However, one should judge all these matters by measuring together (*summetrēsei*) 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.

Having examined the Greek philosophers, it is equally important for us to examine how some western scholars evaluate and reformulate the concept of happiness, which they learned from ancient Greeks. According to Brad Art, happiness indicates the meaning of intended pleasure and the absence of pain. Pleasure is the only desirable end in itself (Art, 1993). Another conception of happiness is: "Happiness is the best thing in life, the greatest of our goods. It is different from the other goods we aim at; it is not another end, but the way we actively pursue those other ends, and so can be referred to as the use we make of those ends. Since happiness is our own activity it is something we do and so it is up to us" (Annas, 1993, p. 329).

### **3. Research Questions**

The above definitions of happiness are taken from the Greek as well as the Westerner philosophers. Indeed, they have their own views of happiness. However, they seem to restrict the concept of happiness to the present life only. They, in fact fearful to discuss the existence of happiness after death because most of them do not believe in life after death. This, from the point of view of Islam, is the most flawed argument of the western scholars regarding the concept of happiness.

Their avoidance to discuss the concept of happiness in the context of the afterlife does not resolve the doubt and uncertainty that plagues the concept. This could be the contributing factor why westerners are still confined in their understanding of the concept of ethics. Observing it from an Islamic viewpoint about ethics, they appeared to be 'lost' and this sense of 'lost' is one of the factors continues to refrain them from exploring the concept of happiness in its full capacity. Al-Attas (1998, Semester III 97/98) makes an observation regarding their 'fear' of discussing the concept of 'happiness' after death. He opines that this is especially so in the case of modern Western philosophy which does not know whether there is such a thing (death), and whether we are going to be responsible for it. You cannot run away from it-the ancient Greeks tried to run away from it by pretending that there is nothing after you die, you are just finished, you

are non-existent, but then that also did not bring peace and happiness. It creates doubts, it creates uncertainty, and therefore it does not solve the problem.....The philosophers do not want to talk about these problems. Death - very little is known about it. Only now they are trying to probe death and trying to make people accept it as natural, but they do not want to treat that... The fear in those who reject God's guidance is something they cannot get rid of. It is always nagging even if they pretend to believe that there is no such thing. Even if they succeed in pretending, they cannot escape the fact that the idea of happiness, as far as Islam is concerned, is not just in this world, it continues, and therefore you can have false happiness in this world.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

##### 4.1. The Means to Happiness

According to al-Ghazālī, there are four group of means (*wasā'il*) to happiness, which man can utilise to achieve happiness in his life. Each of these four means has four forms of virtuousness. Thus, in actual fact, the total number of means amounts to sixteen. Nevertheless, not all of these means are equally relevant to happiness. In other words, they have their own functions, some are useful and some are necessary to attain happiness. The four groups of means are (1) the 'goods' of the soul (*al-fadā'il an-nafsiyya*), (2) the bodily 'goods' (*al-fadā'il al-jismiyya*), (3) the external 'goods' (*al-fadā'il al-khārijīyya*), and (4) the 'goods' of divine grace (*al-fadā'il at-tawfiqiyya*) (Quasem, 1978, p.58).

The good of soul consists of faith (*imān*) and good character (*husn al-khuluq*). Faith is then divided into knowledge of revelation and knowledge of practical religion. Faith is also regarded as a synonymous to knowledge. As for good character, it is divided into temperance and justice. The description of a good character includes all the virtuous qualities of the soul. This is because temperance and justice involve the repression of desire and anger and it is upon this repression that the acquisition of all the virtuous qualities depends on (Al-Ghazali, 2015). The four possessions of the soul can then be reduced into two minor parts: the faith or knowledge and the praiseworthy qualities of the soul. These two are the nearest means to attain happiness. Since the improvement of the soul through the good qualities can be achieved by action (*'amal*), the nearest means to happiness emerges as knowledge and action (Quasem, 1978, p. 59).

As for the physical possessions, it is remarked as health, strength, long life and beauty. The physical possession is also an essential means to obtain happiness, similar to the former because without it the benefits of the soul cannot be perfectly acquired. The way the former and the physical integrate with each other is obvious. The possession of the soul, which consists of knowledge and action cannot be pursued with ease without sound health and adequate physical strength from the physical possession (Al-Ghazali, 1964). Through this combination, men can pursue better happiness in their life (Quasem, 1978).

The benefits that are exterior to the body are wealth, influence, family and noble birth. Each of these elements has its own role in helping men to gain happiness in their life. In other words, they enhance man to behave appropriately in his worldly affairs and thus give him better opportunities to prepare for happiness. Let us take wealth for instance. By obtaining profitable wealth, the owner will be free from the obligation to obtain the necessities of life. He, in fact, can devote most of his time in accumulating knowledge and put them into action (Sedikides, 2010; Achour, Nor, Amel, Seman, & MohdYusoff, 2017).

As for the noble birth, it does not mean being born in a rich family. It actually means being born in a religious family that cultivate knowledge and piety. According to al-Ghazālī, one who is born in such family will inherit traits of good character from his ancestors and this definition of a noble birth constitutes a true meaning to happiness (Quasem, 1978; Routledge, 2012).

The benefits of divine grace are divine guidance (*hidāya*), divine direction (*rushd*), divine leadership (*tasdid*) and divine strengthening (*ta'īd*). The function of these benefits is to combine the physical possessions and the exterior benefits with that of a soul. Without these benefits, the two former attributes cannot produce the latter. When this happens, the effort of a man to gain happiness will be interrupted. On the contrary, if the four groups of these benefits or possession are fully operational, then men can succeed in achieving happiness with ease in his life (Quasem, 1978; Abde & Salih, 2015).

## 5. Research Methods

From the above explanation, it is now clear to us how happiness can be attained in our life. Indeed, Islam is a genuine religion from God that provides not only a distinct concept of happiness; it also provides a path to attain it. Another important argument which needs to be considered is all these means have a strong correlation with human act and behaviour. Therefore, if one is truly a Muslim, he will have no problem in gaining happiness in his life because most all of these qualities can be witnessed in his actions and attitudes. He will lead an easy life in accordance to God's commands and obeying His guidance. God will bless his life and he will be granted with the no end of pleasure and happiness, in the form of the love of God.

In comparison to this, the western method in calculating and measuring happiness in their lives can be explained through the Pleasure Minus Pain method:

Act A produces 12 units of happiness and 6 of unhappiness

(12-6 = 6 units of happiness)

Act B produces 10 units of happiness and 1 of unhappiness

(10-1 = 9 units of happiness)

According to them, Act B is preferable because it produces a greater net amount of happiness compared to six units of happiness for Act A. There are also other measurements invented by western scholars in calculating the happiness; for example, the intensity, the duration and the fruitfulness (MacKinnon, 1995). Although this calculation seems logical, it is still insufficient in preparing a man to gain happiness in his life. In short, they are baffled by their own conception of happiness. They comprehend happiness only in a limited capacity. They know the way to achieve it, but unfortunately, they are misled by their arguments and philosophies.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. The Primary Mechanisms to Happiness

According to al-Ghazālī, there are two primary mechanisms which must be obtained in order to attain happiness. These devices are knowledge and action (acting on that knowledge). He argues that these

mechanisms provide the necessary method to ascend men from the lower rank of animals to that of those who behold the beauty of God's glorious face.

As for the act of faith (*'ibādāt*) itself, it does not imply a specific devotional acts prescribed by the *Sharī'a*. In fact, it indicates actions of good deeds related to man's outward (*al-a'māl az-zāhira*) and inward self (*al-a'māl al-bāṭina*) (Quasem, 1978). The outward self is related to devotional acts directed towards God and the good acts to be performed for one's family life, society and others (Zahid Aziz, 2007). As for the inward self, it is related to the action of purifying the soul (*tazkiyat al-qalb*) from evil character-traits and actions that purifies the soul with good qualities. In short, all these actions help man to gain happiness in his life (Quasem, 1978).

For knowledge, it is not an ordinary and plain knowledge. In fact, it is a kind of revealed knowledge, that is, the knowledge of God and the path to Him. This knowledge is also known as the science of gnosis (*'ilm al-ma'rifa*) (Quasem, 1978). The concept of knowledge and action as the primary mechanisms to happiness is also linked with the concept of man's moral perfection (*kamāl*) and of his provision (*zād*) for the next life. It is for knowledge and action that the soul is brought to the physical world and it is their highest grade, which forms the soul's perfection, ensuring the highest grade of happiness (Quasem, 1978).

The concept of knowledge and action as the primary means to happiness is also linked to the love of God. Al-Ghazālī explains that love necessarily follows knowledge. In other words, the strength of love depends upon the strength of knowledge, the weakness of love of the world and the degree of intimacy with God are created from the remembrance of Him. As for the action, it produces the love of God in these following ways; the evil qualities of the soul are but various aspects of its love of the world, therefore purification clears the soul from this love and thus makes it fit for the love of God (Quasem, 1978).

To conclude, by practising these mechanisms of obtaining happiness, man would gain his happiness in both the temporal world and the world after death. With the understanding that he is steadfast in his faith by obeying God's command, avoiding His prohibition and always exercising the knowledge and act accordingly, he will never regret his choices. In fact, God will grant him with the Vision of God (al-Attas, 1995; Nasr, 2014), his heart will always be full of tranquillity and he will always be happy and achieve happiness in its real sense for the rest of his life.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper has discussed briefly but comprehensively the meaning and experience of happiness. From the discussion, the conclusion that could be derived is that there is no end in happiness. In fact, one can obtain happiness for the rest of his life, both in temporal and secular life as well as in the hereafter. In fact, in the hereafter, he will be granted with the Vision of God, the finest end of happiness. Concerning the means to happiness, it is clear that Islam provides such an exclusive path for man to attain happiness in his life. This path covers man's outward and inward behaviour. It also contributes such as tremendous influence in man's life. These means, if exercise scrupulously, will enhance man's attitude and action to a better merit. In short, he will find himself honored by layman and blessed by God. Concerning the knowledge and action, which are the primary means to happiness, there is no doubt that these elements will lead those who exercise it to the love of God. Furthermore, he will be granted with the Vision of God in the

hereafter. Those who practice these elements could be regarded as a good Muslim. This is because they really perform what God and His messenger have ordered them in the Qur'ān and Hadīth.

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