

ACHIEVING TRUE HAPPINESS: A STUDY OF MUHAMMAD HOSSEIN TABATABAI'S PHILOSOPHICAL-MYSTICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

The question of what constitutes true happiness has been a core philosophical issue that has warranted multiple attempts in the attempt to provide a final answer, either from a purely religious or philosophical perspective. The issue of happiness is closely connected to the meaning of life and its ultimate outcome and purpose. The modern Muslim philosopher Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai discussed the nature of happiness at length. In his view, human beings instinctively strive to attain happiness or the ultimate good which can only be achieved through nearness to God. Therefore, true happiness requires the believer to commit righteous deeds and avoid sinful acts. This study follows a philosophical-Sufi approach and uses a descriptive-analytical method to examine the nature of happiness, the relationship between happiness, goodness and pleasure according to Tabatabai. In line with Islamic thought, true and lasting happiness can only be attained in the Hereafter, and happiness in this life, no matter how acutely and deeply felt, is merely a shadow of the true happiness of the believers who have attained God's permission to enter Paradise.

Keywords: *Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai; Happiness; Almighty God; Nearness to God*

Abstrak

Pertanyaan tentang apa yang dimaksud dengan kebahagiaan sejati telah menjadi inti masalah filosofis yang memerlukan banyak upaya untuk memberikan jawaban akhir, baik dari perspektif agama atau filosofis murni. Problem kebahagiaan terkait erat dengan makna hidup, hasil, serta tujuan akhirnya. Filsuf Muslim modern Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai mengkaji sifat kebahagiaan secara komprehensif. Dalam pandangannya, manusia secara naluriah berjuang untuk mencapai

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kebahagiaan atau kebaikan tertinggi yang hanya dapat dicapai melalui kedekatan dengan Tuhan. Oleh karena itu, kebahagiaan sejati mengharuskan orang beriman untuk melakukan amal saleh dan menjauhi perbuatan dosa. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan filosofis-sufistik dalam pola deskriptif-analitik untuk mengulas esensi kebahagiaan, hubungan antara kebahagiaan, kebaikan dan kesenangan menurut Tabatabai. Sejalan dengan pemikiran Islam, kebahagiaan sejati nan abadi hanya dapat dicapai di akhirat, dan kebahagiaan dalam hidup ini, betapa pun tajam dan dalamnya dirasakan, hanyalah imajinasi dari kebahagiaan sejati orang-orang beriman yang telah memperoleh izin Tuhan untuk memasuki Surga.

Kata kunci: *Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai; Kebahagiaan; Tuhan Maha kuasa; Kedekatan dengan Tuhan*

مستخلص

لقد كان المقصود بالسعادة الحقيقية نقاشاً ومشكلة فلسفية أساسية تتطلب قدراً كبيراً من الجهد لتقدم إجابة نهائية إما من منظور ديني بحت أو فلسفي. ترتبط مشكلة السعادة ارتباطاً وثيقاً بمعنى الحياة والنتائج والأهداف النهائية. يفحص الفيلسوف المسلم المعاصر محمد حسين الطباطبائي طبيعة السعادة بشكل شامل. من وجهة نظره يسعى الإنسان غريزياً لتحقيق أعلى سعادة أو خير لا يمكن تحقيقه إلا من خلال القرب من الله. لذلك فإن السعادة الحقيقية تقتضي من المؤمن أن يعمل الحسنات ويتعد عن المعاصي. تمت دراسة هذا المقال باستخدام منهج فلسفي صوفي بنمط وصفي وتحليلي لدراسة جوهر السعادة والعلاقة بين السعادة والخير والسرور من وجهة نظر الطباطبائي. وفقاً للفكر الإسلامي لا يمكن تحقيق السعادة الحقيقية والدائمة إلا في الآخرة. والسعادة في هذه الحياة مهما كانت عميقة وعريضة هي فقط خيال السعادة الحقيقية للمؤمنين الذين حصلوا على إذن الله لدخول الجنة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: محمد حسين طباطبائي سعادة؛ الله سبحانه وتعالى؛ القرب من الله

A. INTRODUCTION

From a strictly philosophical viewpoint, the prophets were commissioned to cultivate the intellectual talents and moral tendencies of their people. In fact, the prophets were entrusted with the task to guide these talents and tendencies in human nature through divine commands and programs. The act of acquiring knowledge can only be performed through divine permission, and it is God who has endowed humans with the means of cognition through which they are able to see the manifestations of the beauty and perfection of truth in the guidance of the prophets. It logically follows that spiritual happiness can only be achieved by obeying God's commands because human nature can only achieve happiness when acknowledging God and submitting to His will.¹

¹ Harry J Gensler, *Reasoning about God: An Introduction to Thinking Logically about Religion*, 1 ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003320920>. William J. Wainwright,

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One of the fundamental issues discussed in ancient philosophy and ethics is human happiness and how to achieve it. Throughout history, different views and approaches have been expressed by ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates,² Plato,³ and Aristotle,⁴ to be succeeded by Islamic philosophers such as al-Farabi,⁵ Ibn Miskawayh,⁶ Ibn Sina,⁷ and Mulla Sadra. Modern thinkers have paid equal attention to the issue of happiness and have offered their own responses and interpretations on the basis of their respective worldviews; however, it seems that all of them agree that happiness is the ultimate desire and a reflection of the true perfection of humankind.

Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai (1903–1981) was a Shi'ite mystic, philosopher, and commentator who played an eminent role in the development of modern Islamic thought, Seyyed Hossein Nasr being his most influential student. Tabatabai produced important works in philosophy, theology, ethics, exegesis, hadith, and mysticism⁸ where he also discussed the issue of happiness closely linked to his interpretation of some verses in the Holy Qur' n. Tabatabai defines happiness as “the ultimate good” that humans—by their very own nature—wish to attain. He distinguishes between two types of happiness; happiness in this world and happiness in the Hereafter. However, he emphasizes that this world is the place for acquiring happiness but not the place for attaining it. Tabatabai believes that there is only one state of

Religion and Morality, Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 1–3.

² Burkhard Reis, ed., *The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics*, 1 ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511482595>. George Klosko, “Socrates on Goods and Happiness,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1987): 251–264.

³ Richard D. Mohr, “A Platonic Happiness,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1987): 131–145. Rachana Kamtekar, “Social Justice and Happiness in the ‘Republic’: Plato’s Two Principles,” *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (2001): 189–220. Richard D. Parry, “Morality and Happiness: Book IV of Plato’s ‘Republic’,” *The Journal of Education* 178, no. 3 (1996): 31–47.

⁴ Francesca Alesse dan Philosophy Documentation Center, “The Predicative Role of ‘Being Good’ in Aristotle,” *Ancient Philosophy* 42, no. 1 (2022): 171–89, <https://doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil20224211>. Matthew Cashen, “The Ugly, the Lonely, and the Lowly: Aristotle on Happiness and the External Goods,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2012): 1–19. Jay R. Elliott dan Mathesis Publications, “Aristotle on Virtue, Happiness and External Goods:,” *Ancient Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2017): 347–59, <https://doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil201737228>.

⁵ Abu Nasr al-Farabi, “Epistle Indicating the Way to Happiness,” *Sententiae* 36, no. 1 (2017): 93–104.

⁶ Ufuk Topkara, *Miskawayh’s Tah b al-A l q: Happiness, Justice, and Friendship*, 1 ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507328>. Mohd. Nasir Omar dkk., “Islamic Notion of Happiness (Al-Sa’ada): An Analysis of Miskawayh’s Thought,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 19, no. 1 (1 Juni 2021): 49–57, <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.19.2021.195>. Oliver Leaman, “Ibn Miskawayh, the Soul, and the Pursuit of Happiness: The Truly Happy Sage,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 32, no. 1 (1 Januari 2021): 124–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etaa041>. Ina Kiseliova-El Marassy, “Qur’anic Sa’ada (happiness) in the Philosophical Concepts of Miskawayh and al-Ghaz l,” *LOGOS* 109 (Desember 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24101/logos.2021.89>.

⁷ Ismail Lala dan Reham Alwazzan, “Transcendental Happiness in the Thought of Ibn S n and Ibn ‘Arab ,” *Religions* 14, no. 6 (31 Mei 2023): 729, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060729>.

⁸ Hamid Algar, “All ma Sayyid Muh}ammad H{usayn T{ab t}ab : Philosopher, Exegete, and Gnostic,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 326–51.

true happiness that can be experienced by humankind due to their nature as created beings that leads them to a certain path of knowledge serving a specific goal and end. Mankind is a single species whose benefits and losses are common to all irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, age, or status in society. Happiness is thus a universal and constant human experience; however, ultimate and true happiness can only be found in one's nearness to God. As all human beings have originated from God, they must strive in this world to be worthy of returning back to Him, which requires them to be righteous.

Several previous studies examined some aspects of Tabatabai's thought, often in relation to other Islamic philosophers. For example, Yaghoubi examined the views of Mulla Sadra and Tabatabai concerning their understanding of happiness and its relationship to wisdom and virtue.⁹ Firoozabadi and Bonyani studied and compared the definitions of happiness, pleasure and perfection and also the levels of happiness from the perspective of al-Farabi and Tabatabai.¹⁰ Further, Abdullah (2015) attempted to determine the relationship between prosperity and politics and how collective prosperity can be achieved through a righteous government based on Tabatabai's thought, while Hosseinizadeh focused on the role of reason in achieving happiness.¹¹ However, none of the above studies examined the nature of happiness, the relationship between happiness, goodness, and pleasure, and the nature of true happiness based exclusively on the works of Tabatabai in form of a comprehensive and complete study of his views. This study is an attempt to answer the following questions: What is the definition of happiness in Tabatabai? Is it an inherent part of human nature to seek happiness? What is the difference between happiness, pleasure, and goodness? Is every pleasure good? Does every good lead to happiness? How does Tabatabai define true happiness? Is happiness the same for all people? Is happiness a fixed state or does it change over time? According to Tabatabai, what are the types of happiness? What is the highest level of happiness?

B. DISCUSSION

1. Definition and Nature of Happiness

Tabatabai follows both a philosophical and a mystical approach to defining happiness. He explains the general concept of happiness from a philosophical perspective; however, when discussing true happiness, he shifts to a more esoteric viewpoint. According to him, true

⁹ Ebrahim Yaghoubi, "Happiness from the Viewpoint of Mulla Sadra and Allameh Tabatabai," *Journal of Philosophical-Theological Research* 10, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁰ Dehghani Firoozabadi Vahid dan Bonyani Mohammad, "A Comparative Study of Happiness from the Perspective of al-Farabi and Allameh Tabatabai," *Ethics Quarterly* 4, no. 16 (2014).

¹¹ Fakhalsadat Hosseinizadeh, "The Role of Reason in the Study of Happiness from the Perspective of Allameh Tabatabai," *Farhang-e Pazhuohesh* 12, no. 37 (2019): 5–30.

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happiness is reserved for those who have reached the highest levels of perfection and have proceeded from an intellectual to a spiritual level.

Tabatabai offers a comprehensive and general description of happiness, considering his mastery of the sciences of exegesis, hadith, mysticism, ethics, and philosophy. He understands that every human instinctively strives to attain a state of happiness and perfection. The first type of perfection is something that a person does not have and can only gain by losing another perfection, which renders one's existence incomplete. On the other hand, the second perfection results in the perfection of one's whole, removes a defect, and is inherently desirable.¹² It is obvious that the second perfection is what the pure human nature confirms, and true happiness requires this type of perfection. The intrinsic desirability of happiness follows a more mystical approach as described by notable Islamic mystics. For example, Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) wrote that the desire of happiness is inherent in all human beings. All people seek happiness but often fail to differentiate between false happiness and real happiness and end up suffering. However, true happiness causes no pain and suffering and only results in endless joy and felicity, which is the result of closeness to God.¹³

In the same context, Tabatabai believes that humans naturally like happiness and strive to achieve it.¹⁴ Tabatabai defines happiness by stating that “the happiness of anything is its attainment of goodness so that through that charity it can achieve its perfection and benefit from that perfection; and happiness in human beings, which is a creature that benefits from body and soul, is the attainment of physical and spiritual charity.”¹⁵ Tabatabai does neither consider happiness to be limited to this world nor limited to the Hereafter and believes it to be a worldly and otherworldly thing. In other words, mankind should and can achieve happiness in this world and in the next.

This approach seems to be inspired by the Islamic mystic Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) and his notion of happiness. Tabatabai was indeed strongly influenced by Ibn 'Arabi's intellectual style and context as reflected in his works on various subjects. In the view of Ibn 'Arabi, the distinguishing feature of human life is the ability to enjoy inspiration and discovery, that is, to

¹² Ali Shirvani, *Translation and Explanation of the End of al-Nahayat al-Hikmat*, 3 (Qom: Book Garden Publications, 1994), 159.

¹³ Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, *F hi M F hi* (Tehran: Negah Publications, 2022), 85. Ali Asghar Dalili Saleh dan Mohammad Shah Badizadeh, “The Basic Function of Happiness and Vivacity from Rumi's Point of View,” *Propósitos y Representaciones* 8, no. SPE3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.20511/pyr2021.v9nSPE3.1110>.

¹⁴ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *Qur' n in Islam* (Tehran: Social Sciences Foundation, 1982), 87.

¹⁵ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafs r al-Qur' n*, vol. Vol. 15 (Qom: Islamic Publications Office, 1997), 11.

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benefit from true knowledge that brings about happiness and the benefit from the ultimate good which is the perfection of body and soul.¹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi believes that the goal of all human beings is happiness. This happiness can be a result of the grateful mercy of the truth, which is universal, but it can also be the result of God’s obligatory mercy in exchange for the believer’s obedience in the path of the Shari‘a.¹⁷ He sees the truth of the world and human life within reach of those who, with the help of faith and inner discovery, have gone past its dreamlike appearance and reached its innermost in a state of awakening.¹⁸

Tabatabai further stipulates that “the meaning of happiness is that which is good for man because he is human, and the meaning of oppression is everything that is evil for man because he is human.”¹⁹ According to this definition, people know instinctively what is desirable and what is undesirable, and anything that is inherently desirable can help bringing about happiness, and anything that is considered undesirable and harmful can cause them misery. This approach of Tabatabai is a kind of inspiration from al-Ghazali’s (1058–1111) approach to explaining happiness. As a pious Sufi, al-Ghazali believed that the happiness of anything is in its experienced pleasure and comfort, and the pleasure of anything is according to its nature, and the nature of everything is based on its creation.²⁰ He believed that each body part can experience happiness and pleasure and wrote: “The pleasure of the eyes is to see good pictures, and the pleasure of the ears is to hear good sounds. The same is true for other body parts.”²¹ Proceeding to the heart, the most important human organ, he wrote: “The happiness and pleasure of the human heart is the knowledge of the truth, because the heart was created to know God, and everything that the son of man does not know if he gets to know it, it will give him a state of joy.”²²

Similarly, Tabatabai explains that humankind has but a single and true happiness and people are led to a certain tradition by their special essence or nature. Accordingly, they choose a certain path that leads them to a specific goal and end. Mankind is a single species

¹⁶ Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn Arabi, *al-Fut h t al-Makk yya*, Trans by Muhammad Khajavi (Tehran: Mull Publications, 2011), 489.

¹⁷ Ibn al- Arab , *The Alchemy of Human Happiness F Ma rifat K miy Al-Sa da*, ed. Stephen Hirtenstein (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2017), 1-3.

¹⁸ Arabi, *al-Fut h t al-Makk yya*, 379.

¹⁹ Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafs r al-Qur’ n*, Vol. 1:197.

²⁰ Achmad Khudori Soleh, “Al-Ghazali’s Concept of Happiness in The Alchemy of Happiness,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (13 Desember 2022): 196–211, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.122.14>. Meis Al-Kaisi, “Rethinking Conceptual Sufism: A Synthesis of Islamic Spirituality, Asceticism, and Mysticism,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 11, no. 2 (27 Oktober 2021): 169–93, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2021.11.2.169-193>.

²¹ Ab H{ mid Muh}ammad ibn Muh}ammad al-T s al-Ghaz l , *M z n al-‘Amal* (Cairo: D r al-Ma’ rif, 2006), 80.

²² Ab H{ mid Muh}ammad ibn Muh}ammad al-T s al-Ghaz l , *Ihy ’ ‘Ul m al-D n*, ed. Muh}ammad Wahb (Damascus: D r al-Fikr, 2000), 56.

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whose benefits and losses are common to everyone's soul and body and do not differ. Thus, what people experience is either happiness or vexation. Therefore, only a fixed tradition leads them to that specific goal which is already determined by their nature. A righteous society cannot prosper if human happiness differs because of the perceived differences of its members. Also, if the well-being of individuals varies according to the differences between land and region, and the social tradition, which is the religion, is formed according to the needs of each particular region, then human life is no longer considered universal. Also, if the happiness of human changes over time, then human society would not have evolved, and humanity would not move towards perfection, and every imperfection and perfection would be specific to its time. However, humanity moves towards perfection when there is a common and fixed direction shared by all human beings of the past, present, and future.²³ According to Tabatabai, happiness is a fixed and universal thing that is the same for all human beings, and there is no specific happiness for a specific individual according to their ethnicity, region, or religion. Further, the activity of human life is always in the direction of achieving happiness and may sometimes succeed in achieving this goal and sometimes fail. Nevertheless, "man has no purpose in his life but happiness."²⁴

According to Tabatabai's understanding of the relevant verses in the Holy Qur' n, happiness and wretchedness are not inherent in human beings but are optional and acquired states. He cites the verse, "They will say: our Lord! Our misfortune overwhelmed us, and we became a people astray"²⁵ to prove this point. The disbelievers consigned to Hell will be forced to admit that they themselves had chosen their wretched fate by making the wrong choices and following the wrong path. On the other hand, if happiness and wretchedness are not voluntary and acquired, the promise of Heaven and Hell would be meaningless. Although the disbelievers will blame themselves, they will also consider themselves the victims of their own injustice. They will see their souls as colorless plates that could either take on the color of happiness or the color of wretchedness. What is obvious is that wretchedness will come over them, but this wretchedness will be of their own accord as a result of the sins they have committed and the malice of their actions.²⁶

Interpreting the verse, "How can you disbelieve in Allah when you were lifeless and He brought you to life; then He will cause you to die, then He will bring you [back] to life,

²³ Abdolmutallab Abdullah, "Government and Prosperity in Allameh Tabatabai's Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (2015): 63.

²⁴ Tabatabai, *Qur' n in Islam*, 23.

²⁵ The Holy Qur' n, Surah Mu'min n, 106.

²⁶ Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafsr al-Qur' n*, Vol. 15:70.

and then to Him you will be returned”²⁷ Tabatabai writes: “In this noble verse, Almighty God states the truth of man and what He has entrusted to him, and the reserves of perfection and happiness and the circle of human existence and the houses that this creature goes through on his path means life of this world and then death and then purgatory and then death and life of the Hereafter, and then he returns to God and points out that this house is the last house on man’s path. The course of human evolution is expressed in this verse and similar verses. Man is an evolving being who goes from imperfection to perfection in his path and is constantly and gradually changing and evolving step by step. Man died before he came into existence, and he was a part of the earth, then he came to life by the permission of God, and then God killed him, and by reviving man, He gave him life, and man evolved. In this course of evolution, man has grown from this earth, and through the stages he reaches a point where he finds an extraterrestrial and immaterial creation. When man reaches this stage and the angel of death takes his soul, he begins his final journey to reach nearness to God and rest in the presence of God.”²⁸

It follows that happiness is a natural thing for human beings. All people want to achieve happiness in themselves, but in order to achieve this truth, they must follow the commands of Almighty God. The only sure way to achieve happiness is to accept the guidance of the prophets who were commissioned by the command of God to save mankind from the errors of their own misjudgment and to guide them to happiness and salvation. Thus, happiness means to return to the original state of the created human in Paradise where they are with God and are near to Him by doing righteous deeds and avoiding sins and ugliness.

2. Happiness, Goodness, and Pleasure

According to Tabatabai, something is called good when we compare it to other things and find that which meets our purpose and destination. However, what we define as good depends entirely on our chosen purpose and destination, so we need to know our true purpose and destination first before we can decide what is good for us.²⁹ From the spiritual viewpoint, happiness is the ultimate good that cannot be compared to anything else. Nearness to God is the ultimate good that is desired by all humans, and true happiness is the achievement of this ultimate good. It is for this reason that Tabatabai also calls true happiness the “ultimate good”

²⁷ The Holy Qur’ n, Surah al-Baqara, 28.

²⁸ Yaghoubi, “Happiness from the Viewpoint of Mulla Sadra and Allameh Tabatabai,” 333–334.

²⁹ Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafs r al-Qur’ n*, Vol. 3:132.

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and God as the source of “absolute happiness”.³⁰ Given their nature as created beings, humankind are instinctively aware of the good or evil of things and know which one suits their pure nature and which one suits their desires. If, however, a person’s soul becomes accustomed to sin and desire, it becomes corrupted and cannot recognize anything else. However, the human soul is a divine creation that is pure because it is from God who has breathed His soul into Adam. In other words, “good” can be divided into “real good” and “false good”. Real good is what is sought by mankind because it is inherently good, rather than for its immediate benefits.

From Tabatabai’s point of view, real happiness is the good destination that people strive to achieve so that they can reach their most worthy and superior level of existence. Since humans are physical as well as spiritual beings, their happiness and what is good for them is also physical as well as spiritual.³¹ The explanation of physical and spiritual happiness is also derived from Sufi principles, which consider different pleasures for the body and soul and consider both as having their own pleasures. ‘Aziz al-Din al-Nasafi (1212–1281) explained that there are two types of happiness; physical happiness and spiritual happiness. Achieving physical happiness depends on keeping the body clean and using it to do good deeds. Similarly, spiritual happiness is achieved by staying away from lust so that the soul does not get trapped in the filth of base desires. The Hereafter will also provide for physical happiness by being safe from the Hellfire and enjoying the bodily pleasures of Paradise and for spiritual happiness by being near to God and having earned his everlasting pleasure. However, he argues, the spiritual happiness is more powerful than any other kind of happiness; whoever tastes this happiness will no longer require physical happiness.

In fact, more ascetic interpretations of spiritual happiness moved to consider physical happiness as an obstacle to attaining spiritual happiness. To achieve spiritual happiness, the seeker (*salik*) must become indifferent to physical happiness and put it aside.³²

Tabatabai divides pleasure into three categories. The first type comprises the pleasures that are derived from nature, such as the delicious flavors of all kinds of foods and fruits and the appreciated beauty of a landscape, plants, and animals. The second type consists of intellectual pleasures that both improve man’s worldly life and do not cause harm or corruption to one’s faith. Thinking about creation and using reason to devise new ways of

³⁰ Tabatabai, Vol. 15:140.

³¹ Vahid dan Mohammad, “A Comparative Study of Happiness from the Perspective of al-Farabi and Allameh Tabatabai,” 86.

³² Lalu Agus Satriawan, “The Contribution of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya to Salafi Sufism,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 12, no. 1 (22 Juni 2022): 86–88, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2022.12.1.71-96>.

improving the life of others belong to this category. The third type includes pleasures that, although they are intellectual, are fueled by arrogance and greed and cause misery and destruction, such as some scientific advancements that are used for unethical ends.

In another instance, Tabatabai argues that human notions of joy, sorrow, grief, desire, hatred, suffering, and comfort are often colored by subjective perceptions of happiness and misery. Therefore, instances of happiness and wretchedness are not regarded the same in different instances, depending on whether they apply to the soul or the body. On this basis, the worldly and materialistic person who is not yet adorned with divine morality aims only at achieving material pleasures and neglects spiritual pleasures; however, the gratification of physical lust and desire often comes at the price of pains and sufferings from which there is no available relief and only leave regret and misery.³³

Therefore, according to the teachings of the Holy Qur' n from which the view of Tabatabai is derived, every human is composed of an eternal soul and a perishable body, bound to return to their Lord. Every source of pleasure, be it physical, intellectual, or emotional, that does not prevent a person from remembering God and obeying his commandments, will be the source of happiness in his soul and body. Further, some events that cause pain to the body will cause happiness for their eternal soul, such as martyrdom in the way of God. Thus, the source of true happiness is derived from the source of the absolute good which is God.³⁴ Other forms of happiness are, therefore, only temporary and have no lasting positive effect, neither on the body nor the soul.

In short, Tabatabai makes a meaningful distinction between correct and principled pleasures that have a lasting and beneficial effect on the individual and others that are ultimately corruptive and destructive.

3. Great Happiness (True or Real Happiness)

On many occasions, Tabatabai discusses the truth of human existence and the purpose of human creation and the path that leads to true happiness while referring directly to the Holy Qur' n, such as the verse, "O you who have believed, upon you is [responsibility for] yourselves. Those who have gone astray will not harm you when you have been guided. To Allah is your return all together; then He will inform you of what you used to do."³⁵

³³ Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafs r al-Qur' n*, Vol. 3:11.

³⁴ Tabatabai, Vol. 3:56.

³⁵ The Holy Qur' n, Surah al-M 'idah, 105.

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According to this verse, we find that misguidance and guidance are two opposite words. The Holy Qur'an invites people to happiness, a good end, and a good goal, and states that the true loss of man is only with Almighty God, and whoever is guided to God will never go astray. On the other hand, God, as a stimulus to maintain the path of guidance, commands the believers to serve their souls and follow their guided path which will lead them to true and lasting happiness. Therefore, the path to human happiness is the soul.³⁶

Tabatabai asserts that true happiness is only achieved through closeness to God and says: "Proximity to Almighty God causes a person to be exposed to divine mercy and avoid the causes of cruelty and deprivation. In other words, when God draws His servant closer to Himself, He sends him to a position characterized by attaining God's Mercy and Grace".³⁷ Proximity to God exposes the believers to the divine mercy and forgiveness and places them in a position where no sorrow or grief enters them. They experience no deprivation and shortcomings, and whatever they desire is available to them. Him. However, in order to reach this worthy position, they must follow the commands of Almighty God and abstain from sinful acts. In fact, the world is the place of attaining happiness, and in the Hereafter, this happiness will become manifest, and the believers will be rewarded for their righteous deeds and correct choices made in this world.

According to Tabatabai, the real cause of happiness is to attest to the highest authority namely God, according to one's ability. He writes: "According to the existence of a relation and independent existence that every effect is a relation to the cause according to his disability and without it he never has independence, so the perfection of every effect and the end of his existence is the existence of his cause. It is impossible for an effect in his evolutionary movement to go beyond the perfection of the cause of his existence and the order in which it is; on the other hand, it is impossible for the effect, in its evolutionary movement, to go through all the stages of its existential perfection and not reach the level of its cause. Therefore, the assumption of non-realization of the effect end is impossible."³⁸

It follows that the ultimate goal arises in all beings out of their inherent desire, according to their created nature. From the very beginning of creation, they are equipped with the preconditions to reach this goal, which can be called the developmental attention

³⁶ Mostafa Azadian, *The Doctrine of Salvation from the Perspective of Allameh Tabatabai with a Look at the Common Perspective of Christianity* (Qom: Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute, 2006), 75.

³⁷ Tabatabai, *al-M z n f Tafs r al-Qur' n*, Vol. 19:207.

³⁸ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai dan Seyed Hadi Khosroshahi, *Collection of Essays* (Qom: Book Garden Publications, 2008), 108.

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documented to God. This general divine guidance has no error and no deviation in it.³⁹ The path that God has determined for man to reach happiness is a safe path and free from any misguidance. This path has been shown to human beings by the prophets. It depends on the will of human beings to follow the divine guidance and not their own desires and the call of Satan, which only causes misery and damnation. Tabatabai argues that one of the necessary things to achieve happiness is practicing austerity and suppressing one's desires.⁴⁰ The same was stated by the early Islamic mystic, Abu Yazid al-Bistami (804–874) who believed that austerity and happiness have a reciprocal effect, and suppressing desires is the beginning of moving toward spiritual happiness. He considered observation as the only means of understanding the teachings of attaining happiness, which leads to divine closeness and plunges man into endless happiness.⁴¹

Similarly, Tabatabai believes that the truth of happiness is only experienced through closeness to Almighty God, and it is this closeness that exposes the believer to the light of divine mercy and forgiveness and removes the causes of cruelty and misery. When a person comes closer to God, he is saved from all the causes of sorrow and misguidance, and he is also freed from everything that turns him away from God. This view adopted by Tabatabai on the issue of true happiness is inspired by the great Sufi master, Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191). Suhrawardi explained that happiness means that the soul's interests and affections are directed towards the light, which is the world of the sublime (upper world), and directed away from the world of contradictions, violence, and enmity with the darkness and the physical world connected to the body. But if someone's affections are towards the world of darkness and body, like status and wealth, and their emotions are tangled with the world of contradictions and anger at the upper world, he is afflicted with misery. Suhrawardi also calls happiness an eternal paradise and misery a spiritual hell, where a person's soul is in torment, although his body may be at peace.⁴²

Elsewhere, Tabatabai considers the true and ultimate perfection of man in reaching the level of guardianship (*wil'ya*) and writes: "Indeed, the truth of every perfection is the absolute and permanent aspect of that perfection, and from this it becomes clear that God is the same truth of every perfection because He is the side of every perfection and beauty, and from this it becomes clear that the attainment of every creature to its true perfection requires

³⁹ Tabatabai, *al-Mazn f Tafsr al-Qur' n*, Vol. 16:284.

⁴⁰ Tabatabai, Vol. 15:290.

⁴¹ Yaghoubi, "Happiness from the Viewpoint of Mulla Sadra and Allameh Tabatabai," 118.

⁴² Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, ed. Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi, vol. 2 (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Wisdom Foundation, 2012), 185.

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annihilation, and the annihilation of any creature requires the survival of the truth of that creature.”⁴³ Tabatabai refers to the Qur’anic verse, “Everyone upon it will disappear, while your Lord’s face will remain full of majesty and splendor”⁴⁴ when he argues that the true perfection of mankind is in fact the expression of their closeness to God and their realization of true monotheism by assuming their entrusted guardianship (*wil ya*). This interpretation of happiness reflects Tabatabai’s mystical approach. *Wil ya* in Islamic mysticism is equivalent to the greatest manifestation and expanded existence, the highest position, the holiest grace, connecting Allah and creatures to each other, and the essence of prophecy. *Wil ya* in Islamic mysticism begins with the Almighty God and then ends with His rightful guardian on earth, which ends with the death of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).⁴⁵ However, given Tabatabai’s adherence to the Shi’ite creed, he considers the Imams to be the continuation of the Prophet’s path, who assumed the *wil ya* after the Prophet (PBUH).⁴⁶ Therefore, true happiness is to be close to God, who is the origin of everything and the destination of everything. Humans have been sent to this world to perform righteous deeds and avoid sinful acts in order to regain the right to dwell in Paradise and return to their original, eternal home.

From Tabatabai’s point of view, the purpose of legislating the divine religion is not only to regulate human society but also to ensure that all of creation achieves its existential perfection and purpose, in this world and the Hereafter. Islam is the religion of the two blessings, as it provides proper laws to reform and govern society as well as effective means to achieve nearness to God. Human happiness and human wretchedness are in direct proportion to closeness or distance to God, the former is prosperous and safe, while the latter suffers torment and cruelty.⁴⁷

Tabatabai affirms that “the true happiness of man is achieved by doing righteous deeds”.⁴⁸ In his commentary on verses 119 and 120 of Surah al-M’idah, he explains: “Reza’s position [satisfaction] is the same as servitude, and servitude requires purification of the soul from disbelief and sin. One of the effects of this position is that man has reached the position of satisfaction in the worship of the kingdom; that is, everything that is and sees is from the

⁴³ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *Risala al-Velayat* (Qom: Ahl al-Bayt Institute, 1981), 150.

⁴⁴ The Holy Qur’ān, Surah al-Rahmān, 26–27.

⁴⁵ Leila Chamankhah, “Dialogue with The Master: Early Shi’a Encounters with Akbar an Mysticism,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 10, no. 1 (1 Juni 2020): 155–78, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2020.10.1.155-178>.

⁴⁶ Suhraward, *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, 2:185.

⁴⁷ Suhraward, *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, 2:185.

⁴⁸ Tabatabai, *al-Mazānif Tafsi r al-Qur’ān*, Vol. 2:363.

grace and mercy of God, and everything that God has forbidden is due to His wisdom.”⁴⁹ Reza’s position reflects the spiritual seeker (*s lik*) who strives to earn God’s pleasure. According to the great mystics, Reza is the position of true seekers who reach a degree of certainty after passing through levels and authorities. When the seeker’s heart is illuminated by the light of certainty and his eyes of insight are enlightened by observing the good design of God, he assumes the position of Reza.

Tabatabai concludes that the path to true happiness is determined by God and taught by the prophets. The worldly life is the place of cultivation of the human soul which needs to be purified and polished to be able to glow in the presence of God.

4. Categories of Happiness

Tabatabai divides happiness into worldly and otherworldly happiness, of which worldly happiness is material happiness and otherworldly happiness is spiritual happiness. He writes, “The real life and real happiness of a society is material and spiritual happiness in this world and the hereafter.”⁵⁰ He emphasizes that it is a unique characteristic of Islam to offer a moderate approach between materialism and spirituality, unlike Judaism which is overly materialistic and Christianity which is overly spiritualistic and ascetic. Islam is thus the only monotheistic religion that is truly compatible with human nature.⁵¹

Tabatabai proposes that just as man has two dimensions of body and soul, each of these dimensions has its own needs and deserves its own happiness, and neither should be abandoned. Happiness is a level of truth that each person reaches in proportion to the level of their good deeds and the steps they have taken in the way of God; however, the level each individual can achieve may differ. While true and lasting happiness can only be experienced in the Hereafter, small benefits of happiness can be experienced in this world.

The fact that the human soul belongs to the world of matter prevents it from understanding how different the intellect is from the soul. When the soul is separated from the body, the human intellect can receive the rational readings from the active intellect, and the soul is free to connect with the true lovers and will experience such happiness that it no longer pays any attention to the material world.⁵² Therefore, the Hereafter is the place of real happiness. In this world, mankind cannot achieve true happiness, but can only provide the

⁴⁹ Tabatabai, Vol. 6:224.

⁵⁰ Tabatabai, Vol. 17:292.

⁵¹ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *Social Relations in Islam with the Supplement of Several Other Treatises*, ed. Mohammad Javad Hojjati Kermani, vol. 1 (Qom: Book Garden Publications, 1999), 35.

⁵² Morteza Shajari, “Happiness and its Relationship with Knowledge and Worship from Ibn Sina’s Perspective,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 4, no. 8 (2011): 69.

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conditions for achieving true happiness by doing righteous deeds and following the divine commands. This world is the place of the promise of happiness, while the Hereafter is the place of its realization. Worldly happiness is not comparable to the happiness experienced in the Hereafter; it gives but a small and fleeting taste of it.

In the opinion of Tabatabai, happiness is real; whatever agrees with human nature is right, and whatever is right leads to happiness. Human nature considers happiness as a pleasure in the world through receiving blessings from God and enjoying a dignified position as His servant, which is independent of material wealth and status. Yet at the same time, happiness means approaching Almighty God through faith and righteous deeds in constancy and moderation while avoiding extremes.⁵³ The desire for immortality is part of human nature; however, this world is perishable and so are its many pleasures. Therefore, true happiness can only manifest itself in the Hereafter, and equally true wretchedness and despair. Worldly misery will reach its end with death; however, eternal damnation will cause eternal misery.

It has always been a central question whether there is a purpose in life and whether or not life continues after death. The purpose and meaning of life have been addressed by all religions and discussed by thinkers of all persuasions and intellectual traditions. Often, philosophy and religion interplayed, and religious thinkers applied philosophical concepts to religious truth, as did Muslim philosophers like Tabatabai who based their ideas on the Holy Qur' n, religious tradition, and reason to discuss central issues like the issue of happiness and provide erudite explanations.

First, human nature constantly strives for perfection. The happiness of anything is its attainment of goodness so that through that charity it can achieve its perfection, benefit from that perfection, and make up for any defects. Second, happiness in human beings, who are endowed with a body and a soul, is the attainment of physical and spiritual goodness which causes happiness. Third, happiness is universal and is not affected by time or place. Fourth, pleasure alone is not a criterion for happiness, as not every pleasure is good, and not every good leads to happiness. True happiness is caused by one's closeness to God and liberates the believer from sorrow and fear. Fifth, the path that God has determined for mankind to reach happiness is a safe path, free from error, and entirely dependent on the individual's will. Thus, every person is responsible for their own happiness and their own fate. Sixth, true happiness is realized in the Hereafter, which is eternal. Seventh, happiness is a truth that each person

⁵³ Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *Shia in Islam* (Tehran: Odaba Publications, 2009), 16.

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achieves in proportion to their good deeds and the steps they have taken to carry out God's commands. Tabatabai takes a moderate approach to happiness and cautions his readers not to forsake one for the other.

C. CONCLUSION

From the point of view of Tabatabai, man has been sent to this world to do his best in worship and divine commands to return to his origin. The origin is Almighty God, and the way to reach God is to follow the same way He dictated to human beings through His prophets to do righteous deeds in the world and avoid sins to reach Him again. In a way, the world is the place to attain happiness, which will eventually be realized in the hereafter, and man can live and benefit next to God. According to Tabatabai, happiness is a real and true thing; whatever agrees with it is right and whatever is right causes happiness. Human nature considers happiness as a pleasure in the world and having many blessings and dignity with Almighty God and does not consider lack of money and wealth as a criterion for not having dignity and status in the sight of God. Mortal and transient cases are not considered the cause of happiness. The criterion of happiness is approaching Almighty God through faith and righteous deeds and knowing human truths based on the principle of moderation and avoiding excesses. That man follows the commands of Almighty God and the divine prophets to reach the end of the good that God has promised.

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