

## **A Study of the Views of Farabi and Ibn Sina on the Definition of Happiness and Its Relation to the Faculties of the Soul**

**Einollah Khademi**<sup>1</sup>

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This research is an attempt to compare the views of Farabi and Ibn Sina on the question of happiness, which is discussed in two parts: the definition of happiness and its relation to the faculties of the soul. Farabi has suggested five definitions and Ibn Sina one definition for happiness. It will be shown that in some respects the definition of Ibn Sina and in some others those of Farabi are more to the point. In regard to semantics, Farabi uses a few terms such as *good*, *joy*, and *true wisdom*, while Ibn Sina employs such terms as *joy*, *perfection*, *good*, *reward*, and *achievement* as equal to happiness. In regard to the relationship between happiness and the faculties of the soul, Farabi holds that experiencing happiness is confined to the theoretical rational faculty of the soul and the other faculties cannot understand happiness, whereas Ibn Sina argues that all the faculties of the soul have the ability to acquire happiness, and the happiness of each faculty lies in the actuality of its potentials.

**Key Words:** happiness, faculties of soul, rational soul, Farabi, Ibn Sina.

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### **The Question**

The question of happiness is one of the fundamental, old, and interesting questions that has occupied the minds of thinkers in various fields, such as literature, ethics, philosophy of ethics, *hadith*, exegesis, theology, and philosophy. In philosophy, this question has occupied not only the minds of ancient philosophers—such Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—but also the minds of other philosophers in different ages in various schools of philosophy. Abu Nasr Farabi (873-950), known in Latin as Alfarabius or Avenasar, and Abu Ali al-Husayn ibn ‘Abdullah ibn Sina (980-1037), or Avicenna, are known to be the most important philosophers in the Muslim world and highly influential on Christian

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1. Professor of Theology at Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Iran, email: e\_khademi@ymail.com

thought during the Middle Ages. These two philosophers have discussed happiness in its different dimensions, and it is not possible to have a comprehensive discussion of their views in one article. Therefore, this article will focus only on comparing the views of these two great thinkers as to the definition of happiness and on the relationship between happiness and the faculties of the soul.

### **1. Definition of Happiness**

In his different works, Farabi gives various definitions for happiness:

a. In his *Admonition on the Way of Happiness (al-Tanbih ala sabil al-sa'adah)*, he offers the following two definitions. Happiness is the aim which every person desires and attempts to achieve; for happiness, according to him, is a kind of perfection (Farabi 1992, 228).

b. According to his second definition, happiness is the most useful and valuable effective good. In his first classification, he divides the effective good into the *good by itself* and the *good by others*. By the former, he means the good that is not the medium to reach other ends and is desired for itself. On the other hand, the good by others—such as ascetic practices and medicine—is that which acts as the medium to achieve other purposes.

In another classification, Farabi divides the good by itself into two kinds. The first kind comprises those things that are good by themselves but sometimes become the medium to achieve other things; for example, knowledge sometimes becomes the medium to attain other ends, such as wealth and fame. The second kind includes those things that are good by themselves and never become the medium for achieving other purposes. This kind of good is the best of good things. Happiness is an instance of this kind of good, which is the greatest and most perfect (Farabi 1992, 228-29).

c. In *Civil Politics (al-Siyasat al-madaniyyah)* Farabi defines happiness as the absolute good and adds that although all things that lead to happiness are good, they are not good in themselves but good by others. In other words, they are good in respect of being useful in reaching happiness. On the other hand, all things which in one way or another impede the attainment of happiness are absolutely evil (Farabi 1992, 72).

d. Farabi defines happiness as good and desired by itself and believes that there is nothing greater and more desired than happiness. Therefore, happiness never becomes a medium to reach other ends; rather, other things or deeds become good and virtuous if they lead to happiness (Farabi 1999, 46).

e. Happiness is the development and perfection of the soul, and it is due to this development that the soul becomes independent of matter in its subsistence and reaches the level of immaterial intellects and the Active Intellect (Farabi 1999, 46).

In his treatise *On Happiness (Fi al-sa'adah)* Ibn Sina defines happiness as that which is desired for itself and is the goal by itself (Ibn Sina 1400AH, 260).

## **2. Critique of Definitions**

Looking closely into the definitions given by Farabi and Ibn Sina we may infer the following points:

### **a. Offering a Definition on the Basis of Purpose**

Looking into the first definition of Farabi, we understand that he defines happiness on the basis of purpose. However, he has not mentioned any condition for the purpose. This indicates the weakness of his definition, for we know that philosophers divide purpose into two kinds: by itself and by others. By the latter they mean the purpose that becomes the medium to achieve other purposes, such as wealth, eating, drinking, accommodation, and so forth; but the former is that which never becomes a medium for reaching other purposes. Indeed, this kind of purpose is the ultimate purpose and the best and the most perfect of purposes. On the basis of Farabi's accepted philosophical system, and looking closely at his second, third, and fourth definitions, we understand that happiness cannot be a purpose by others; rather, happiness is an instance of a purpose by itself.

Accordingly, it would be better and more accurate if Farabi, in his first definition, added a condition to the purpose and clarified that what he meant by purpose was purpose by itself and not purpose by others. Unlike Farabi, Ibn Sina adds this condition to his definition and defines happiness as purpose by itself, which makes his definition more accurate than that of Farabi.

### **b. Definition of Happiness on the Basis of the Concept of Good**

Farabi bases his second, third, and fourth definitions on the concept of good. In his second definition, he argues that happiness is the most useful and the most valuable effective good. He first divides good into by itself and by other, and then divides good by itself into good by itself that becomes the medium for reaching other ends, and good by itself which never becomes the medium to achieve other things. He asserts that happiness is the greatest and most perfect instance of the latter kind of good.

In his third definition, Farabi defines happiness as the absolute good, and in a part of the fourth definition, he defines it as good by itself.

In these definitions, Farabi is influenced, to some extent, by Aristotle, who in his invaluable *Nicomachean Ethics* divides good in respect of being relative or absolute into partial (relative) and the highest good. Aristotle argues that the highest good is happiness, and

claims that all people—whether common or elite—call the highest good happiness (Aristotle 1999, 10-11). Aristotle divides good into three types:

1. External goods, by which he means things such as money, properties, influential friends, good children, a noble family, and fame.
2. Goods of the body, such as health, physical beauty, and bodily power.
3. Goods of the soul. Aristotle believes this type is an instance of the true and noble good and is superior to the other two types mentioned. He also claims that happiness is an instance of this type of good (Aristotle 1999, 34).

Considering the explanation of Aristotle, we understand that in the first division he considers happiness as an instance of the highest good and in the second division he considers happiness as a good of the soul. In this sense, Farabi is influenced by Aristotle, as he uses this concept of good in his definition of happiness. Moreover, in his definition of happiness as the absolute good, he is also influenced by Aristotle, for absolute good corresponds with the highest virtue. Moreover, in his reconstruction of the definition of happiness, he also benefits from such terms as effective good by itself and good by itself. However, he is not a mere imitator of the ancient philosophers. Rather, he is a selective philosopher who takes the materials for his view from different sources but develops the structure of his thought innovatively.

The other point which shows Farabi is not a mere imitator of others is that he knowingly goes beyond Aristotle's definition of happiness and gives other definitions.

#### **c. Definition on the Basis of Desirability**

In his fourth definition, Farabi states that happiness is that which is good by itself and is desired for itself. Ibn Sina is influenced by this definition of Farabi. Happiness is desired by itself in the sense that man does not seek happiness for the sake of anything else.

#### **d. The Complete Immateriality**

The fifth definition is very much different from the other four definitions, for in Farabi's first definition based on the concept of purpose and in his other three definitions—i.e., the second, third, and fourth definitions—based on the concept of good and in the fourth definition, he benefits from both the concept of good and the concept of desirability. However, in the fifth definition, he argues that the happiness of the soul is in its abstraction from the world of matter. In other words, the human soul in the first stages is immaterial on the side of the essence but related to the world of matter on the side of action. However, if the soul reaches the high levels of perfection and attains the ranks of immaterial intellects and particularly the Active Intellect,

it becomes completely independent of matter. Farabi calls the attainment of such position as happiness.

In Farabi's thought, the fifth definition refers to the highest level of happiness (the greatest happiness), rather than the absolute happiness, for most of the people are unable to attain such a level of happiness. However, we can consider the fourth definitions a definition of the general or absolute happiness, for this kind of happiness is restricted to a few people.

Ibn Sina discusses this definition in relation to the soul. He states that we can consider happiness in two ways: with respect to the different faculties of the soul and with respect to the soul itself. In the latter case, the happiness of the human soul is its complete detachment from the matter and its corollaries, attainment of complete immateriality or intellect (Ibn Sina 1363Sh, 109).

#### **e. A Semantic Analysis**

Farabi divides pleasure into different kinds: sensible and conceptual (intellectual), immediate and mediated, more known and more truthful pleasures (Farabi, 1992, 69-72). He believes that pleasure is a many-sided and graded reality, and its highest rank is achieved when man ascends to the rank of the *Peaceful Soul*, and with all his existence perceives the Real intuitively (Farabi 1405AH, 65). Attaining such a rank is attaining happiness.

In Farabi's thought, the term true philosophy is sometimes considered as equal to happiness, for in his viewpoint, happiness is a many-sided reality, and in order to reach the highest rank of happiness, one needs to attain the true wisdom—that is, becoming aware of the Real, who is the source of all actualities and perfections and know to what extent beings and especially man can attain the virtue and perfection of the Real (Farabi 1405AH, 65).

As was explained in the second point, in his definitions of happiness, Farabi mostly uses the term good, and three of his definitions—the second, the third, and the fourth definitions—are founded upon the concept of good.

Ibn Sina, in *Treatise on Happiness (Risala fi al-sa'ada)*, sometimes holds that happiness and pleasure and joy are equal. As an example, he maintains that the highest rank of happiness is when all the veils between the lover and the beloved are removed and the lover is united with the beloved. In such a state the soul attains such a joy and pleasure that is matched by no other joy or pleasure (Ibn Sina 1400AH, 276).

Of course, it should be noted that some think that happiness is the attainment of sensible pleasures and worldly positions. However, this is not true, for he who knows the truth of things knows that happiness cannot be the attainment of worldly, temporal pleasures, for all these pleasures are accompanied with deficiencies and pain (Ibn Sina 1400AH, 261).

The term perfection is another term which is used for happiness in the philosophical system of Ibn Sina. Sometimes perfection is used for the immediate actuality and is divided into first perfection and second perfection; by first perfection is meant that to which the specificity\* of the species belongs (such as rationality for man), and second perfection is the perfection attained following the formation of the species (such as bravery for man).

Perfection in the discussion of happiness is a second perfection with positive value, in the sense that man has many potential tendencies and abilities, and the change of these potential tendencies and abilities into actuality in the domain of moral acts is called happiness and in the domain of the immoral acts wretchedness (Ibn Sina 1420AH, 43:91; 1403AH, 289-92).

In regard to the relationship between perfection and happiness, Ibn Sina differentiates between the faculties of the soul and the soul itself. He maintains that for every faculty there is an actuality which is its perfection. When the potential changes into actual, that potential reaches its perfection and happiness. For example, the perfection and happiness of lust is pleasure; the perfection and happiness of wrath is in dominance; and the perfection and happiness of fancy is in desire and wishes. However, the perfection of the human soul is its detachment from the matter and its corollaries and reaching total immateriality or intellect. The human soul is not restricted to understanding the intelligible; with the body, it can perform other deeds, and each of these deeds has a particular happiness. Therefore, the soul has different kinds of happiness, and these kinds of happiness are realized when the faculties attain what is appropriate to them and the direction of all deeds is towards justice (Ibn Sina 1363Sh, 109).

In order to explain the meaning of happiness, Ibn Sina sometimes uses the term good. For otherworldly happiness, he uses the term “the coming good,” and for worldly happiness, he employs the term “the present good.” In his *Treatise on Happiness*, he suggests the pure and refined people to “hear this admonition by the depth of your soul and all measures you should take in the direction of attaining *the coming good* and hear this advice with all your being and tend to acquire *the present good* and do whatever deed that brings you closer to the life with eternal happiness” (Ibn Sina 1400AH, 263).

In his *A treatise on Revealing the Essence of Prayer (Risalat al-kashf 'an mahiyyat al-salat)*, which was written with a mystical tendency, Ibn Sina states that otherworldly happiness is equal to reward, death is the separation of the human soul from the body, and the resurrection is the union of man with the spiritual substances. The reward and happiness of man after death is connected to his deeds. If his deeds are perfect, his reward and happiness will be perfect; and if his deeds are imperfect, his reward and happiness will be imperfect on the Day of Judgment, and he may even be despised and scorned. On the basis of this analysis, he adds that prayer makes the human soul similar to heavenly bodies, who in their constant worship of the Real attempt to get the eternal reward (happiness). Accordingly, the Prophet of Islam (s) states: "Prayer is the pillar of religion" (Ibn Sina 1420AH, 35:303).

In order to explain happiness, Ibn Sina sometimes uses the term *salvation (fawz)*. He believes that if man knows the Hereafter and the First Creator truly, he will achieve happiness and salvation in the Hereafter (Ibn Sina 1400AH, 278). It is not hidden from those who are familiar with the Quran that the terms reward and salvation are Quranic, and using such terms to explain happiness indicates the influence of the holy Quran on Ibn Sina.

Comparing the views of Farabi and Ibn Sina in regard to the meaning of happiness, we see that Farabi uses the terms pleasure, good, and wisdom as synonyms to happiness, and of these three terms, he uses the term good most frequently. Obviously, these three terms are taken from ancient philosophers, especially Greek philosophers in their writings.

Like Farabi, Ibn Sina employs the terms pleasure and good as synonyms to happiness, but these two terms, and especially the term good, are less frequently used. Besides these two terms, Ibn Sina uses some other terms such as perfection, reward, and salvation. The term perfection is used by ancient philosophers, but the two terms reward and salvation are clearly taken from the Islamic tradition.

### **3. The Relationship between Happiness and the Faculties of the Soul**

Muslim philosophers speak of different souls—vegetative, animal, rational, and spherical—and for each of these souls, they mention certain faculties. For the vegetative soul, they mention the three faculties of feeding (which itself contains the four faculties of absorbing, holding, digesting, and repelling), growing, and procreating. For the animal soul they speak of the two faculties of acting and perceiving, and they mention two faculties for the former faculty: the instigator of motion (which itself comprises the two faculties of lust and ire) and the agent of motion (which has the three states of absorption, rest, and contraction). For the faculty of perception, they speak of the

two apparent and hidden senses, and then they divide the apparent sense into five kinds: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. The hidden sense is also divided into five types: common sense, imagination, fancy, memory, and manipulator.

Muslim philosophers hold that besides these faculties, the human soul has a rational faculty, which they divide into theoretical and practical reasons. In other words, the human soul has two aspects: an essence or a position by itself, and a managing aspect or an attachment to the body. The soul, in respect of essence (the position by itself), is the theoretical and practical reasons, but from its managing aspect or the position of attachment to the body, it depends on its relation to the body and using it as an instrument. The soul on the basis of the second aspect has the vegetative and animal faculties (Farabi 1366Sh, 73-74; Ibn Sina 1403AH, 2:404-5; Bahmanyar 1375Sh, 757, 782, 806; Mulla Sadra n.d., 8:53-87).

It is interesting to note that Muslim philosophers do not speak of these faculties of the soul in detail always, but depending on the occasion and the necessity called by the discussion they refer to some of the faculties. Accordingly, Farabi in his invaluable book *Civil Politics (al-Siyasat al-madaniyyah)* speaks of theoretical and practical reasons, abstracting faculty, imagination, and sensible faculty and discusses all those as the faculties of the human soul, stating that only the theoretical reason can perceive happiness, and the other faculties of the human soul—namely, the sensible faculty, imagination, and abstracting faculties—have no such ability. It is interesting to know that Farabi believes that even the practical reason, which in comparison to other faculties has a higher position and rank, cannot perceive happiness. It is more important to know that the theoretical reason does not possess such ability either except when it turns to happiness with all its being, which is not always the case.

Accordingly, Farabi reminds us that if man shows any laxity in perfecting his theoretical reason, he cannot perceive happiness as it should be or cannot be aware of it and pursue it. As a result, he may go astray and consider issues such as pleasures, dominance over people, or honor which it gains through abstracting faculty as his purpose and happiness, and consequently perpetrate evil deeds by means of his abstracting faculty, imagination, and sensible faculty.

Farabi insists on the point that knowing happiness by the theoretical reason is a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient. He maintains that besides knowing happiness by the theoretical reason, man should make it the purpose of his life and be very eager to achieve it. Otherwise, he will take things that are illusory happiness as the goal of his life, and this incorrect choice will no doubt lead him to evil deeds (Farabi 1366Sh, 73-74).

In his discussion of free will, Farabi restates his claim regarding happiness as being exclusive to the rational faculty of human soul in another way. Following this discussion, he speaks of the soul's sensible, imagination, and rational faculties and notes that each of these three faculties has its own abstracting faculty. Accordingly, there are three kinds of will:

1. The first will. Farabi holds that the sensible faculty has its own desire, resulting from sensation and is called the first will.

2. The second will. The faculty of imagination, like the sensible faculty, has its own desire, originating from the imagination and is called the second will.

3. The third will. The rational faculty, like the first two faculties, has its own craving, resulting from reasoning and is called the third will.

Farabi maintains that the term free will applies only to the third will, which is exclusive to man and not the other animals. It is because of the third will that man can do good or bad deeds, and it is in the light of this will that the reward and punishment become meaningful in the other world. He adds that unless the third faculty is realized in man, speaking of happiness or misery is absurd. It is only on the basis of this will that man becomes the agent of his good and bad deeds, attributed with beautiful or ill dispositions, and known as happy or miserable (Farabi 1366Sh, 72; 1999, 45-47).

It seems that Farabi is influenced by Aristotle here, for the latter maintains that no living creature has a share of happiness other than man. From the viewpoint of Aristotle, this is due to the fact that other creatures have no reason, and this means that happiness is directly related to the rational faculty of man.

Moreover, from the perspective of Aristotle, the whole divine life is happiness, and so far as humans have a portion in this activity, they can be happy. However, no other living creature can be happy, for they have no share in contemplation or rational speculation (Aristotle 1999, 393).

In another place, Aristotle states that it is natural that we do not call a cow or a horse or any other animal happy, for none of them can do any of the activities we have in mind. Similarly, a child cannot be happy as it is not capable of such deeds—that is, the virtuous activities of the soul. Therefore, when we call a child happy, this indicates our hope that it will be so in future (Aristotle 1999, 139).

#### **4. Critique and Analysis**

The main reason for the difference between the views of Farabi and Ibn Sina seems to be that Ibn Sina differentiates between the two aspects—happiness in regard to the different faculties of the soul and happiness

in respect of the soul itself—whereas Farabi does not make such a distinction.

From what was said above, we realize that from the viewpoints of Farabi and Ibn Sina, happiness is the good and the end which is desired by itself and forms the highest good. Accordingly, if we do not differentiate between the two aspects of the soul, we should, on the basis of Peripatetic philosophy, consider happiness in relation to the theoretical rational soul, for, according to the views of Farabi and Ibn Sina, the highest faculty of the soul is its theoretical faculty, and the true happiness of the soul is the intellectual happiness. Accordingly, all other faculties of the soul should serve the theoretical rational faculty.

Now if we consider the actuality of each faculty of the soul as its happiness, which is the view of Ibn Sina, since all the faculties of the soul serve the theoretical rational faculty, and, on the other hand, happiness according to Farabi and Ibn Sina is the purpose and good that are desired for themselves and not for others, then happiness would not be the purpose and the good desired for themselves; rather, it would be the purpose and the good desired for others, for all the faculties of the soul are subservient to the theoretical rational faculty.

Being aware of this sophisticated point, Ibn Sina discusses happiness from two respects. When we consider the happiness of the soul in regard to each faculty, the happiness of the faculty would be the actuality of its potentials, and, this would be its purpose and good desired for itself. However, when we change our perspective and consider happiness in regard to the soul itself, the actuality of each faculty would not be the purpose and the good desired for itself and, therefore, cannot be considered as the soul's happiness.

## **Conclusion**

Farabi and Ibn Sina are the two great philosophers in the Islamic philosophical tradition, who are counted as Peripatetic philosophers. Like other great thinkers of the world, they have used the works of their predecessors, but analyzed them independently. They have adopted the ideas they agreed with, and rejected what they considered to be incorrect. They also developed their own original views and ideas.

Moreover, by comparing the views of Farabi and Ibn Sina we find out that, unlike some thinkers, Ibn Sina is not merely an imitator of Farabi; rather, he is an original philosopher who sometimes knowingly leaves Farabi's views for some other views. As an example, he abandons the definition of happiness given by Farabi and offers his own definition. In the same way, in regard to the relation between happiness and the faculties of the soul, he rejects the view of Farabi and suggests his own idea. In this article the ideas of both thinkers were discussed and analyzed.

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