



The Idea of Happiness in the Qur'an

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Happiness in Qur'anic ethics

The desire for happiness is a natural desire, and both the Greek and Islamic philosophers agree that happiness is the final end, but they differ as to what this end is and how it should be achieved. A key question that philosophers pose is whether virtues are sufficient for happiness, or whether they require external goods such as health, wealth, and friends for the fulfillment of happiness. We know from experience that a passionate attachment to external goods such as wealth and material possessions can be harmful to human life. However, we cannot also dismiss the idea that these external goods are necessary to contribute to our well-being and to the nurturing of virtue.

It should, furthermore, be borne in mind that the ethical philosophy of the Qur'an is not purely intellectual, but that it is bound up with a diagnosis of human suffering and an intuitive conception of human flourishing. Islamic ethicists, therefore, in their attempt to grapple with human suffering, try to articulate a mode of living in the world. They do not simply philosophize about ethics for the sake of academic pleasure. They propose a theory of immoderate desire that they believe to be the root cause of human ailments, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual in nature. Contemporary moral philosophy has much to learn from Islamic philosophical wisdom if it wishes to move beyond the academy and take its place in the daily life of human beings. In reading the works of the eleventh-century Islamic ethicists such as al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali, one finds that their philosophical-literary style engages the reader's entire soul in a way that an abstract and impersonal ethical prose treatise does not.

The meaning of happiness

Happiness in the Qur'an refers to happiness in this world and the hereafter. Happiness in the hereafter, or everlasting felicity, is the ultimate goal of the believer. All the joys that humans experience in this world are a means to ultimate happiness in the next world, and they acknowledge God with gratitude for the blessings granted them.

Happiness that is associated with the word *sa'adah* in the Qur'an is a permanent state and refers to otherworldly happiness or the happiness of the hereafter. This eternal happiness is mentioned twice in the Qur'an, as an adjective and as a verb. God says:

“The day it comes, no soul shall speak except by His permission. Some of them will be wretched, and some happy” (Qur'an 11:105).

“And as for those who are happy, they will be in Paradise, abiding there so long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills, as uninterrupted giving” (Qur'an 11:108).

The word *ata* (giving) appears 14 times in the Qur'an, and nowhere else is uninterrupted giving mentioned. Thus, we may conclude from this that happiness comes from uninterrupted giving from God, but it does not exclude the happiness from the giving of humans. Divine giving is a result of human giving, which means that when humans give freely they will become the recipients of divine giving. God says:

And give good tidings to those who believe and perform righteous deeds that theirs shall be Gardens underneath which rivers run; whenever they are with fruits therefrom, they shall say, ‘This is the provision we received before’; and they were given a likeness of it... (Qur'an 2:25).

This verse refers to the inhabitants of heaven who remember that they experienced similar provisions in this world. This is the perspective of the inhabitants of paradise, who remember the world. However, since the provisions in the two worlds cannot really compare, it also refers to a state of wonderment. It is therefore clear that the inhabitants of paradise have not forgotten this world. Thus, the giving that people receive in heaven is akin to the provisions that they experienced on earth. This includes the true provisions of the righteous deeds in this world, which is to give freely of one's possessions and of one's self, as God states: ‘Go forth in the way of God, lightly or heavily, and strive with your wealth and yourselves in the way of God. That is better for you if you but knew’ (Qur'an 9:41).

This kind of happiness, whether of an otherworldly nature or what is akin to it in this world, should be distinguished from mere physical enjoyment (*mut'a*), which is the pleasure that originates purely from the physical senses. Human beings share the latter form of pleasure with animals, as God states: “As for those who disbelieve, they take their enjoyment and eat as the cattle eat” (Qur'an 47:12). This kind of physical pleasure is short-lived because bodily health and external qualities such as wealth and friends are but transient and cannot provide permanent happiness. Thus, God states: “Are you content with the life of this world, rather than with the hereafter? Yet the enjoyment of the life of this world compared with the hereafter is but little” (Qur'an 9:38). So, happiness in the Qur'an refers to a permanent state in paradise and not a state of mere physical joy in this world.

So the otherworldly happiness is not equal to the joy or happiness of this world. Otherworldly happiness is of a higher order, and cannot be identical to worldly joy. The joys (*farah*) in this world, however, are of two types: negative (blameworthy) joy and positive (praiseworthy) joy. Blameworthy joy is worldly joy as God states: “They rejoice in the life of this world, yet the life of this world compared to the hereafter is but a fleeting joy” (Qur'an 13:26). Praiseworthy joy, however, is to enjoy the bounties of God and to be grateful to Him for those bounties. God states: “Say: In the bounty of God, and in His Mercy—in this, then, let them rejoice. That is better than what they hoard (of worldly goods)” (Qur'an 10:58). Thus, if one rejoices in these material bounties purely for the sake of worldly acquisition, then it is a blameworthy joy. However, if one rejoices in it as a gift from God, and for the benefit it brings, then it is a praiseworthy joy.¹

As mentioned, people will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. If they have done good, they will obtain otherworldly happiness, and if they have done evil, they will obtain otherworldly misery. Good people will be given the book of righteous deeds, and they will be happy:

As for him who is given his book in his right hand, he shall say, Come! Read my book! I knew I was going to face my accounting. He shall be in a happy life, in an exalted garden whose fruit-bunches are nigh [to be plucked]. [It

¹ Shayib, Ayat Jihād Awdah, *al-farah fi al-Qur'an al-Karim, Dirāsāt mawdu'iyah, Jāmi'ah al-Najaḥ al-wataniyyah*, 2015, p. 12.

shall be said to them:] Eat and drink to your satisfaction in consideration of what you had left in previous days. (Qur'an 69:19-25; see also: Qur'an 56:27-44; 17:71-72; 74:39)

The Qur'an portrays the exalted garden in vivid terms: "God has promised believing men and believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow wherein they shall abide forever and good homes in the gardens of eternity. And God's pleasure is the greatest. That is the supreme success" (Qur'an 9:72). The believers and the virtuous will have their greatest reward in the pleasure (*ridwan*) of God. The faces of the believers on that day will be "fresh with joy and will be looking at their Lord" (Qur'an 75:22).²

Philosophers have reinterpreted the Qur'anic expression *Yawm al-Qiyamah* (Day of Resurrection) (Qur'an 9:105-109) to mean *Yawm al-Sa'adah* (Day of Happiness). Happiness is a key concept in Islamic philosophy and connotes humans' highest striving for eternal happiness in paradise. We earn this supreme happiness through the purification of the soul. All the bounties that God granted us, whether it be wealth, health, or good friends, we employ to assist us in the purification of the self. In the end, we can only achieve the ultimate happiness through God's Grace. Thus, if we pursue worldly pleasures in moderation and with the proper intention, we serve the immortal soul and not merely our base desires.

Thus, happiness in Islamic philosophical ethics, as expounded by eleventh-century Islamic philosophers, including al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali, concerns two kinds of happiness: happiness in this world and the happiness of the hereafter. The happiness of this world pertains to three aspects: the soul, the body, and the external virtues. The happiness of the soul relates to virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The happiness of the body relates to virtues such as health, strength, and beauty. The happiness of the external virtues relates to virtues such as wealth, status, friends, etc. For Aristotle, these external virtues contribute to the happiness of the soul in this world, and for the Islamic ethicists, they contribute to the happiness of the soul in this world and the hereafter.

² Rahman, F. (1980). *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, pp. 112-113.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus mainly on the external virtues, and particularly on wealth, as it is the primary aspiration in the contemporary age of materialism. Alain De Botton, the Swiss-born British philosopher, argues that the primary driving force today is status, and that wealth is just a means to achieve status. Status makes us famous, influential, and accepted by society. We earn the love of others through high status, and we seek it more than anything else after we have secured our biological needs for food, shelter, and clothing. People of rank are observed by all the world, and everyone is eager to look at them. Rank here is connected to high income and what is owned.³ Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, however, placed self-interest as the primary motive for the division of labor and the economic development that is the consequence of this division of labor. Smith, however, admits that great wealth does not always bring about happiness: “Riches leave a man always as much and sometimes far exposed to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow.”⁴ For Smith, the belief that opulence will make you happy is an illusion, but it is a necessary illusion as it motivates the tradesman to accept a division of labor for the sake of the greater production of material goods. Smith knew that the key to happiness lies in virtue. His anti-materialist strand of thought is best contained in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he called for the stoical attitude of self-restraint to temper the excesses of commercial society. It all depends on how one conceives of wealth.

Smith, like the Stoics, knew that it is not wealth that makes one happy, but virtue. Smith belongs to the anti-compassion tradition started by the Stoics, who tend to be indifferent to the misfortunes of this world and the misfortunes of others. Compassion insults the dignity of the person who suffers. The Stoics see Socrates as a true hero, because of his “calm, self-sufficient demeanor in misfortune, his low evaluation of worldly goods.”⁵ The Stoic repudiation of compassion appears to be hard-heartedness, but it is meant to express the idea of human dignity. The Stoic indifference to the deaths of loved ones should be seen as closely linked to their egalitarian cosmopolitanism. That means that we should have equal concern for all.

³ De Botton, A. (2005). *Status Anxiety*, London: Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 11-14.

⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵ Nussbaum, M. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The problem with compassion is that we attach importance to worldly goods; so if someone loses those goods, we are compassionate because we place value on those goods. Being compassionate does not mean one cannot be merciful. Mercy does not mean that one is not responsible for one's actions, but one is more tolerant of people's faults and will plead for mitigation in sentencing, not a verdict of non-guilt.⁶ Islamic moral philosophers, however, have not been indifferent to the misfortunes of others. While they acknowledge like the Stoics that wealth and other external goods are not the central sources of virtue and happiness, they hold that the basic material well-being of a person is still important, and can contribute to a person's happiness. They may be Stoic in the sense of accepting Divine Providence, but cannot be indifferent to worldly helplessness. They will call for compassion in the face of losses of truly basic goods, such as life, loved ones, nourishment, and shelter. The Prophets were not indifferent to their own suffering; they expressed their emotions, not out of self-pity, but genuine feelings of loss. Prophet Jacob lost his son Joseph and suffered from grief for many years until he became blind because of his tears. Yet, he knew that these trials were all a test from God, and so never ever despaired of God's Mercy.

Islamic scholars had a positive view of wealth and other external goods. Ibn Khaldun explains that the wealthy companions of the Prophet ﷺ and the ascetic-minded Sufis, by contrast, saw wealth not as a means to opulence, but as a means to a higher spiritual end.⁷ Classical philosophers such as al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali, however, regarded wealth as the lowest value in the scale of external virtues. Friends were more highly ranked in value by these Islamic ethicists than money. Al-Isfahani reminds us that true friends are always there for you, whether in good fortune or bad fortune, but superficial friends are only there in good fortune. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Count Leo Tolstoy is an excellent illustration of superficial friends. Ilyich, the main character, is more concerned with his status as a high court judge, but at the age of forty-five, he becomes so sick that he loses his appetite and can no longer go to work. It dawns upon him that he will soon die, but his friends no longer come to visit him. He realizes that he wasted his life

⁶ Ibid., pp. 359-368.

⁷ Mohamed, Y. (2014). 'The Economic Thought of Ibn Khaldun and Adam Smith, with a Focus on the Division of Labour,' in *Islamic Perspective Journal*, LAIS, 12: 1-22.

trying to impress society and that his friends were only there to benefit from his high position and his wealth.

The opportunistic attitude of Ilyich's friends is a characteristic of materialistic culture, which is now also affecting the Muslim world. We need to reorder our scale of values and place greater value on the soul than the body. Indeed, we do need to fulfill the needs of the body, as we cannot live without food, shelter, and clothing. These are biological necessities. If we cannot fulfill our bodily needs, we will become dehumanized and will turn to crime. This is not a justification for crime, but it partly explains why people beg, borrow, and steal. Fellow citizens should have respect for their basic terrestrial needs. It is a truism that 'man does not live by bread alone,' but it is equally true that without bread we cannot live. Abject poverty compels us into a state of vegetative existence.

The Qur'an identifies three goals for human beings, and al-Isfahani places the cultivation of the earth (*'imarat al-ard*) first on the list because production to provide for our needs is a matter of biological necessity.⁸ We require the crafts of agriculture, building, and weaving for the cultivation of the earth and the fulfillment of our bodily needs. These are fundamental needs, without which worship is not possible, and without which we would not be able to transcend our physical existence. Yet, this is not our higher purpose, which is of a spiritual order. In order to transcend our physical existence, we will have to control our desires by cultivating the virtue of temperance.

A temperate life is a life of frugality, self-discipline, and simplicity through the virtue of temperance, which is nurtured when our intellect predominates over our concupiscent faculty of the soul, namely, our desire. The eleventh-century Islamic ethicists did not promote the obliteration of desire, as they knew it is a very powerful desire and a biological necessity. What they did promote is the moderation of desire through reason and the guidance of the Qur'an. The key virtue is temperance. Our desires are only a means to an end, which is to serve the soul, and the soul is a means to serve God. The problem today is that the soul is

⁸ Mohamed, Y. (2019). 'The Ethical Worldview of the Qur'an,' Yaqeen Institute, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/yasienmohamed/the-ethical-worldview-of-the-quran/#.XXuxb5OpHQQ>

more likely to serve desire; thus, the needs of the body have taken priority over the needs of the soul.

For al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali, the external virtues such as wealth, status, and friends are meant to assist ultimately in the cultivation of the soul, and not primarily to serve the needs of the body. Of all the external virtues, wealth is the lowest value. Although we need it, it cannot bring us happiness. It is only a means by which we fulfill our duties to God. Al-Ghazali says people should be financially self-sufficient so that they can give all their attention to the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, wealth and all other external virtues are only a means to an end, not ends themselves. Our focus should be on the justice of the soul, where reason prevails over the body, and the body becomes the servant of the soul and not the soul the servant of the body.

The pleasure derived from material goods is an illusion, and we are like thirsty people who imagine the mirage in the desert to be water: “As to the unbelievers, their works are like a mirage in level ground, which the thirsty supposes to be water, but when he comes close to it, he finds that it is nothing” (Qur'an 24:39).⁹ Happy are those who see material goods as a divine blessing, and miserable are those who cannot see them as such. These wretched people will be tormented by their attachment to worldliness, as the Qur'an states: “So do not let their wealth and their children win your approval, Allah only wishes to torture them therewith in the present life, so that their souls might depart while they are still unbelievers” (Qur'an 9:55).¹⁰

The problem lies in our insatiable desire, and the secret is to control it through temperance. Al-Ghazālī holds that if people discipline their desire (*shahwah*), they will attain the perfection that is distinctive of their nature, which is the heart's knowledge of God (*ma'rifah*). This special perfection is unique to humans and because of it they are able to obtain the higher pleasure:

Know, the happiness of everything—its pleasure, its serenity—indeed the pleasure of everything accords with the needs of its nature. The nature of

⁹ Isfahani, R. (1987). *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', p. 134.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

everything accords with what it has been created for. The eye delights in [seeing] pretty pictures and the ear delights in [hearing] harmonious sounds. Every limb can be described like this. The heart's distinctive delight is in the knowledge of God, the Most High, because the heart is created from it [divine knowledge].¹¹

Thus, the intuitive knowledge of God (*ma'rifah*) can only be attained through the purification of the soul, which includes cultivation of the virtues of temperance, courage, and wisdom. However, the knowledge of God and the happiness of the individual can only be attained if these virtues are directed at the happiness of the hereafter.

This worldly life (*al-dunyā*) is not the main source of our ultimate happiness

People generally forget that happiness is a disposition of the soul and not a condition of circumstance. They confuse happiness with the means of happiness, sacrificing the first for the attainment of the second. The miser seeks money for the mere joy of it and makes the acquisition of money his sole object in life and pursues it to the sacrifice of all rational ends and pleasures. A miserly person said, "Imagine if I did not eat food for fifty years, how much money would I have saved!" Circumstances and character both contribute to happiness, but character is more important as it helps to shape our circumstances. Character also helps to shape our inward attitude to inevitable adverse circumstances and helps us cope with them. Character plays an important part in improving our circumstances; as the Almighty states: "God does not change the condition of people unless they change their souls" (Qur'an 13:11). There are two interpretations of this verse. One is that the onus is on people to take the initiative to change themselves from a state of evil to a state of goodness. The other is that the change referred to is from a state of good to evil. As long as people retain their pure inner state (*fiṭrah*), God will not withhold their blessings. "If man conforms to his *fiṭrah*, his external circumstances will improve, but if he deviates from his *fiṭrah*, his circumstances will deteriorate".

¹¹ Al-Ghazali (1964), *Mīzān al-'Amal*, ed. Sulayman Dunya, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, p. 139.

¹² Regardless of how one interprets the verse, the common view is that change of character is key to a change of circumstances. Contrary to this position is the view of sensational philosophers from Bacon to Marx, who explain the world through sense experience, that external circumstances are fundamental to happiness. Chapter 13, Verse 11, of the Qur'an, however, seems to suggest that we need to change our inner state first before we can improve our external circumstances.

The Qur'an is not opposed to the enjoyment derived from the external virtues of this world. As already mentioned, these contribute to our happiness in this world and the hereafter, but they are not critical to our happiness provided our basic biological needs are fulfilled. It gives one pleasure, for example, to have a Persian carpet in our house, but it is more critical to our happiness in this world to have a secure roof over our heads.

This world is called *al-dunya*, literally; 'the lower world.' The Qur'an mostly uses the expression *al-hayat al-dunya* (the lower life). The concept of *al-dunya* presupposes the concept of *al-akhirah* (the hereafter) and stands in contrast to it. The Qur'an frequently uses these two words: "You desire the ephemeral goods of this world (*al-dunya*), while God desires [for you] the Hereafter (*al-akhirah*)" (Qur'an 8:67). It states that the afterlife is better and more enduring. It teaches that this life is transient and that the real life is the one to come. Life in this world is a gift from God to be used properly, following God's commandments. It is like a farm, where one should sow the seeds of good deeds to reap a harvest in the hereafter. Life in this world is an inseparable part of a unified whole that includes birth, death, and life after death. This provides a context to our life, and it becomes meaningful inasmuch as it is full of good works. The afterlife is always treated in the Qur'an as something in relation to life in this world, and it is mentioned on almost every page. God states: "From the earth We created you, into it We shall return you, and from it We shall raise you a second time" (Qur'an 20:55).

The Qur'an does not disparage the life of this world; instead, it is world-affirming. God states: "It is He who created all that is on this earth for you" (Qur'an 53:25); Also: "Eat from what your Lord has provided for you and give Him thanks"

¹² Mohamed, Y. (1996). *Fitrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature*, London: Taha.

(Qur'an 34: 15). And while seeking paradise, "Do not neglect your rightful share in this world" (Qur'an 28:77). Thus, while believers enjoy the goods of this world, they work towards the higher goods of the next world. Thus, it all depends on one's attitude to this world, and how we live in it. If we are engrossed in the material world and take it as an end in itself, we will forget our ultimate purpose of creation. According to al-Ghazali, the moderate way of living is like the lives of the Prophets, since it fulfills both the needs of this world and the hereafter.¹³ In another passage, al-Ghazali states:

As mentioned, the goal of food is to nourish the body, and the body in turn [through physical acts of worship] is important for the perfection of the soul. He who has understood the order of the importance of wealth, food, and the body, will know the value of wealth, and how it should be ranked in the scale of importance. Once he knows the extent of the honor given to wealth, he should use it accordingly, and fulfill the goal for which it is intended. He will use only what he needs, [bearing in mind] the ultimate goal, which is the purification of the soul. Thus, one should not depend on wealth, but one should only take what is important for one's essential needs. One will then understand why God has disparaged wealth in some places in the Qur'an. And know that your property and your children are only a trial and that God-with Him is a great reward (8:28). One should also understand why God has praised it in some places: And He supports you with wealth and children (71:12). So, in short, if wealth is a means to the Hereafter, it is praiseworthy, and if it is a diversion from the Hereafter, it is blameworthy.¹⁴

Thus, al-Ghazali's understanding of these verses is that wealth can be used for good or evil; good if it helps towards the happiness of the hereafter, and evil if it diverts from the happiness of the hereafter. There is nothing that prohibits believers from enjoying the external goods of the world, including wealth, health, good friends, relatives, beauty, and a good spouse. These are sources of joy in this world, but can also be a means of happiness in the next world. They are not to be conceived as ends, but only as means to otherworldly felicity. These are the bounties of God, for which we are required to be grateful. Although they have a lower value than the virtues of the soul, they benefit us in cultivating those virtues.

¹³ Al-Ghazali (1964). *Mīzān al-'Amal*, ed. Sulayman Dunya, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, p. 377.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 373-374.

For example, through wealth, we can afford to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca and give charity to the poor. It is well-known that Khadija, the Prophet's wife, and Abu Bakr, his companion, were wealthy merchants, but their wealth was not directed at a life of opulence. Instead, it was spent in the path of God.

About 69 verses in the Qur'an refer to God's bounties, including the following: "For God is He who gives all sustenance" (Qur'an 51:58); "There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on God" (Qur'an 11:6); "We have honored the sons of Adam: provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure" (Qur'an 17:70); "If you are grateful, I will add [more favors] unto you" (Qur'an 14:7). These verses affirm that God intended that humans should enjoy the fruits of this world and thank God for them.

The virtue of temperance

According to the classical Islamic ethicists, there are three faculties of the soul: the rational faculty, the concupiscent faculty (desire) and the irascible faculty (emotion). When the rational faculty has control over the two lower faculties of the soul, the virtues of the soul emerge. In this section, I focus on the control of the concupiscent faculty and the virtue of temperance that arises from it.

The classical Islamic philosophers did not recommend the repression of the concupiscent faculty and would have agreed with Sigmund Freud that this will lead to neurosis. Rather, they proposed the moderation of the concupiscent faculty, including discipline over the desires for food, sex, and wealth. A wise person curbs his enjoyment of food, drink, and music. Temperance is that kind of virtue that allows us to be masters of our pleasures instead of being slaves to them. The temperate person is happy because he is independent; he is not a slave to his desires and is content with little.

The concupiscent faculty refers to the abdomen and private parts, and humans enjoy the fulfillment of these parts in the same way that animals do. These are animal pleasures and temperance is the ability to curb such lower pleasures. Al-Isfahani states:

It is the mean between 'greed' and 'abstention.' It is the source of basic virtues, including contentment, restraint, satisfaction of the soul, and generosity. No praiseworthy qualities are possible without these basic virtues. Temperance is the key to attaining these noble traits. Once established in the heart, it moderates all physical pleasures and restrains bad thoughts that induce a person to indulge in sin. When the heart is perfected through temperance, the rest of the limbs will be protected. Without temperance a person will have bad aspirations and bad thoughts—the foundations of vice. The person who desires or thinks of wanting what another person has will become envious. This envy will lead to hostility, and this hostility to quarrelling, which may lead to killing that person. Bad thoughts [about another person] is the cause of enemies, and lead one to wrong and transgression. God has forbidden covetousness and [such] suspicion, saying: "Do not covet that with which God has favored some of you over the others" (Qur'an 4:32); "O you who believe! Shun much conjecture. Indeed, some conjecture is a sin" (Qur'an 49:12).¹⁵

The ambition for material success leads to envy and hostility. The greed for material acquisitions is a source of unhappiness and malevolence. It is never the source of benevolence and wishing others well. The lawyer prays for dissension, and the physician cannot wait for the season of sickness, to make more money. The wealthy person fears the loss of his wealth, but the poor person has nothing to fear because he has nothing to lose. The wealthy person's insatiable desire for luxury is a disease. If he were master of the whole world, he would be still a beggar; he would always be poor. Once we have secured our roofs against cold and heat, and we have enough food to nourish our bodies, then all else is but vanity and excess. Happy is the person who eats only when hungry, and drinks only when thirsty, and lives according to his reason and the guidance from the Qur'an. A good Muslim controls his desires and avoids the sins of envy, gluttony, lust, and greed.

Let us, therefore, curb our appetites, for this is the key to virtue, and virtue is the key to happiness. The virtue of temperance allows us to live according to our needs, not our wants. It is therefore prudent to practice temperance. The month of Ramadan is a month of abstention and helps us cultivate the virtue of temperance.

¹⁵ Isfahani, R. (1987). *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', p. 319.

According to al-Isfahani, contentment (*al-qanā'ah*) is the state of being satisfied with one's fill, which is an important prerequisite for asceticism (*al-zuhd*), or the practice of restricting oneself to very little. The ascetic is one who will give away that which he has, even if he himself needs it. His heart is completely detached from the material world.

Wealth is not having much and poverty is not having little. It is all relative to one's degree of contentment. The poor person who is content is wealthy, as he is satisfied with his simple car and modest house; but the rich person who is not content is poor, as he craves a smarter car and a bigger house. It is not the man who has little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more. The proper limit to a person's wealth is to have what is essential and to have what is enough. Al-Isfahani states:

*He who accepts his poverty by being content with what he has and restricts himself to the minimum for his essential needs is truly rich and is nearest to God. This is affirmed by Saul. When he set out with his forces, he said: 'God will test you with a river. He who drinks from it will not belong to me, but he who refrains from drinking it, will indeed belong to me; but forgiven shall be he who shall scoop up but a handful from it. They drank from it their fill except for a few of them' (Qur'an 2:249). Therefore, God made people rich by reducing their needs. The absolutely rich need absolutely nothing, and that is God. The Prophet (s) said, 'Richness lies not in material acquisitions, but in the richness of the soul.'*¹⁶

The verse in this passage suggests that God did not intend by asceticism that we should reject the world entirely, but that we should only partake in what suffices, and we are forgiven for doing so. That is, scooping up a handful of water from the river is permissible, but over-indulgence is reprehensible. We should take the middle course between excessive satisfaction of desire and abstention from what is unlawful: "O you who believe, forbid not the good things which God has made lawful for you and exceed not the limits" (Qur'an 5:87). Thus, the Qur'an teaches frugality, both in consumption and spending. Frugality means that we can spend our wealth but should not be extravagant: "And squander not [your wealth] wastefully. Surely, the squanderers are the devil's brethren. And the devil is ever

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 321.

ungrateful to his Lord” (Qur'an 17:26-27). The rule is to be moderate without wasting and to be economical without meanness. Furthermore, the revealed book states, “And those who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor niggardly, but hold a just [balance] between those [extremes]” (Qur'an 25:67).

So it is not that we should remove desire, but we should control it to attain nearness to God and happiness in the hereafter. Thus, for al-Isfahani, wealth is a means to an end, which is to attain the virtues of the soul, and the virtues of the soul, in turn, are a means to the happiness of the hereafter. Thus, although wealth has a low value, it can, if properly used, help us in the cultivation of the virtues. Many virtues are connected to wealth, including honesty, justice, charity, and frugality. However, the general tendency is to abuse wealth and, therefore, it is prudent to avoid attachment to the material world. Apart from its ethical and religious value, it has practical benefits such as being able to afford nutritious food and medical care.

Wealth becomes a disadvantage if we are in the service of it, as al-Isfahani says; “Wealth serves, but is not to be served.”¹⁷ Wealth becomes a vice if we are a slave to it, but it becomes a virtue if we are the masters over it. Wisdom should prevail in the use of it, and if used to cultivate the virtues of the soul, then it is a virtue (al-Isfahani, 1987: 389; Qur'an 4:5; 63:9; 23:55-56; 74:11).¹⁸ Al-Isfahani uses a fitting analogy: Just as a traveler stops at a shop to buy what he needs for his journey, the believer stops at a spot and buys only what he needs for his journey to the hereafter, and keeps the balance of his money for the rest of the journey. We should not serve wealth; otherwise, we will fall into vice.¹⁹ Abraham's family became attached to idols and all worldly matters that diverted them from God. The Qur'an describes such people as eventually saying: “My wealth has availed me not. My power has passed from me” (Qur'an 69:28-29). Thus, attachment to wealth will not profit us in the next world, as God states: “Wealth and children are the adornments of the life of this world, but that which endures, [such as] righteous

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 389.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 390.

deeds, are better in reward with thy Lord, and better [as a source] of hope” (Qur'an 18:46).

The Qur'an reminds us to adopt an attitude of detachment to this world. It warns us that the life of materialism will not avail us in the hereafter. Only the pursuit of virtue will lead to enduring happiness. The wise believer is fully aware of the impermanence of this world, so will not allow himself to be attached to it. He accepts death and will even risk his life for the sake of God. He knows that his soul is immortal and death will lead him to the higher happiness of the hereafter. However, those who fear death are ignorant of the immortality of the soul, and fear that they should die and lose all their material possessions.²⁰

The wise person knows that worldly life enslaves him, but death will liberate him. He is happy to return to God but sad that he could not serve Him enough in this world. He has some fear of death, but it is different from the fear of a disbeliever. His only fear is his anxiety when he meets his Lord for the first time, not knowing what God will say to him, or what he will say to God.²¹ He is content with his lot and never complains about his poverty, knowing that inconceivable wealth and permanent residence awaits him in the hereafter. He would say, “Praise be to Allah who lifted our sorrow. Our Lord is indeed All-Forgiving, All-Thankful” (Qur'an 35:34-35). Such a person is content with what God has granted him.²² He is detached from the world, fearless in the face of death, and ready for the hereafter. His only fear is that he has not done enough good to serve his Maker and will be accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Conclusion

In my essay on the ‘ethical worldview of the Qur'an,’ I cited al-Isfahani, who identified three goals of humans as stated in the Qur'an. The first goal is the

²⁰ Isfahani, R. (1987). *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', p. 334; Mohamed, Y. (2006). *The Path to Virtue*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, p. 287.

²¹ Isfahani, R. (1987). *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', p. 335; Mohamed, Y. (2006). *The Path to Virtue*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, p. 287

²² Isfahani, R. (1987) *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā'. 335-338

habitation and cultivation of the earth (*'imarat al-ard*). This goal precedes that of worship and the goal of vicegerency because it is a biological necessity, as we all need food, shelter, and clothing for survival. It is a universal requirement for all human beings. It is not a religious duty like worship, but if we pursue it in accordance with the ethical principles of the Qur'an, then it becomes religious and has the potential to bring us closer to God.

If we indulge in God's bounties in moderation and in appreciation of God, we will develop the virtue of temperance, which is the key to happiness in this world and the next. I have given the example of wealth as an external virtue to be treated as a servant, not a master. The modern world is troubled today because we have made wealth our master, not our servant. If we can rise above our desire, and not make it our god, the world will be a better place to live in. We can enjoy wealth without clinging to it.

Unlike Aristotle, the classical Islamic philosophers hold the view that the control of desire through the virtue of temperance is a means to happiness in this world and the hereafter. These two worlds are interconnected. There is a spiritual element in the happiness of this world if conceived as a means to happiness in the next world. But when one pursues happiness in this world alone, as an end in itself, such happiness can only be transient and fluctuating and cannot yield true happiness. Al-Isfahani and al-Ghazali have Islamized the philosophic virtues in accordance with the ethical worldview of the Qur'an and drew them into the ambit of the religious ethical virtues, such as patience, gratitude, repentance, and trust in God. The philosophical virtues together with the religious virtues are essential for the attainment of happiness in this world and the hereafter.

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