ABSTRACT

“Happiness and Pleasure” are among the prominent topics of the philosophers including Ibn Sina. The ‘arif according to him is a man who manages to obtain truth from the sacred world and enjoy true happiness i.e. the highest pleasure. He can also perform miracles. Ibn Sina himself mentions his own experience to convince his colleagues about intellectual pleasure. This article aims at discussing Ibn Sina’s theory of happiness and pleasure based on his writing in al-Ishārat Wa al-Tanbihat.

Key words:

Introduction

Abu Ali al-Husain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina was born in Afshana in Persia in 980 and he died in 1037 at Hamadhan. By the time he was 10, he had mastered the Koran and much of Islamic Literature. By the time he was 14 he had mastered canon law, much of Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy, not to speak of innumerable Neoplatonic Commentators. At 16 he had read most of the then available books on medicine, and was active already as a doctor. The next few years he devoted to enlarging his knowledge of logic, philosophy and metaphysics. Through most of his life Ibn Sina wandered from princely court to princely court, occasionally employed as vizier, attracting throngs of eager students to his courses on medicine or philosophy, and all the while studying and producing book after book in an incessant flow (Rom Landau. 1958.148-149).

Ibn Sina’s literary output, which spanned a period of approximately forty years was immense. He produced numerous works on logic, physic, mathematics, psychology, astronomy, metaphysics, ethics, politics, medicine, music etc. Anawati’s Bibliography of Avicenna published in Cairo in 1950, list some 276 titles- consisting of kutub, rasāil, ma‘ajim, etc. attributed to Ibn Sina.

Pleasure And Happiness:

This article focused on the concept of pleasure and happiness which are among the prominent topics of the philosophers especially Ibn Sina. Ibn Sina is one of the outstanding Muslim philosophers involved himself in the discussion of the topics in his works such as al-Ishārat Wa al-Tanbihat which will be used in this writing. Ibn Sina pay more attention to the individual happiness. The people he discusses here are the gnostics (‘arif/‘arifūn). The ‘arif, according to Ibn Sina, is a man who manages to obtain truth from the sacred world and enjoy true happiness i.e. the highest pleasure. He can also perform miracles. This is the subject matter of the Ishārat. It seems that Ibn Sina is trying to explain, in terms of his cosmology, a part of the experience of Muslim of his time. Ishārat is one of Ibn Sina’s major philosophical work, presented to his colleagues and not to the ordinary people (Gutas 1988; 140-141). The section of Tasawwuf is the last part of the Ishārat and it has been set out in three chapters: chapter 8 Fi al-Bahjat Wa al-Saadah (on pleasure and happiness), chapter 9 Fi Maqṣamat al-‘ārifīn (on the ranks of the gnostics), and chapter 10 Fi Aṣrūr al-‘Ayt (on the secrets of signs). Each chapter is divided in sections: chapter 8 has 19 sections, chapter 9 has 27 sections, and chapter 10, 32 sections.

In the present analysis of Ibn Sina’s Chapter 8 “Fi al- Bahjat Wa al-Sa’ada” (On pleasure and happiness), (Ibn Sina 1960; 7-46) three topics will be isolated for discussion:

a) The grades of pleasure.
b) The body as an obstacle to the achievement of pleasure.
c) The achievement of the mystic.

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a) The Grades of Pleasure:

Section I (Ibid 7-9) offers a discussion of the forms of pleasure. Ibn Sina divides pleasure into three types: (i) sensual pleasure (al-ladhinda al-hissiya) such as sex and eating, (ii) inward pleasure (al-ladhinda al-batina) such as preserving one’s dignity and self-respect, and (iii) intellectual pleasure (al-ladhinda al-aqliyya). Of the three, Ibn Sina is seriously concerned only with intellectual pleasure, for this, according to him, is the highest of all. In the first place, Ibn Sina mentions the popular view that sensual pleasure predominates, but that is not difficult to disprove. The inward pleasures are higher than the sensuous. For Ibn Sina these two pleasures are lower than the true and the highest pleasure, which is intellectual pleasure, exemplified in the achievement of the gnostic. He offers a comparison of each pleasure as follows:

The person, who, in a competitive situation, even in trivial matters like chess and backgammon, has the opportunity of winning may well be offered the temptation of food and sex, and yet refuse. Others, whose aims in life are chastity, or leadership, will also resist that temptation. Men of nobility and generosity will prefer the opportunity of acting generously over the indulgence of sensual pleasure. Those who are proud will think hunger and thirst trivial matters when compared with their dignity and self-respect. If these inner pleasures (al-ladhinda al-batina i.e ambition, generosity etc.) can overcome the outer pleasures [of food and sex], how much the more so, must intellectual pleasures. (Ibid 8-9)

For one who continues to doubt, specifying that there can be no happiness without food, drink, and marriage (i.e sex), Ibn Sina points to the situation of angels (al-malāka) (Ibid,10) drawing the conclusion that intellectual pleasure is the highest. He then proceeds to discuss the definition of pleasure.

Pleasure, says Ibn Sina in section 3, (Ibid 11-15) is a perception (idrāk) and attainment (nayl) of that which to the perceiver is a perfection and a good (kamal, khayr) in itself. In like manner, pain (al-alam) is a perfection and attainment of that which to the perceiver is a harm and evil (ājāt, sharr). But good and evil are relative. They differ according to the criteria with which they are judged. “The human emotions have one conception of good and evil, and the mind has another, and they do not always agree.” (Afnan 1958; 186). Ibn Sina says,

Good and evil are relative values, they differ from time to time. In moments of sensual desire, food may constitute the good. But in moments of anger, victory is the good. That which is intellectually good is at times, and in some respects, truth and at times, and in other respects, beauty. Also to be counted amongst intellectual goods are thanks, praise, and generosity. In sum, the concern of those who are possessed of intellect, vary. (Ibid 14-15)

Chapter 9 Fi Maqamat al-‘Arifin (On the ranks of the gnostics) offers a description of the gnostic people, who manage to obtain this pleasure. Ibn Sina states,

وكمال الجوهر العقلي: أن تتمثل فيه جلية الحق الأول، قدما ما يمكن أن يقلل منه ببيناته الذي يخصه. ثم يتمثل فيه الوجود كله على ما هو عليه، معروجا عن الشعوب، بدأا في حق الحق الأول، بالجوهرية العقلية العالية. ثم الروحانية السموية، والأجرام السموية. ثم ما بعد ذلك. تمتلا لا يماثل الذات هذا هو الكمال الذي يصير به الجوهر العقلي، بالفعل (23) (Ibid,22-23)

Perfection in an intelligizing substance consists of the following. That the splendour of the First Truth take form in the intellect to the degree that it is capable of acquiring the specific splendour of the First Truth. Then, that the whole of existence should take form in the intellect as it actually is, free from taint and blemish; beginning immediately after the First Truth with the high intellectual substances, then the heavenly spiritual substances, then heavenly bodies, and so on...Through this perfection, the intellectual substance becomes in actu [i.e. moves from being merely potential intellect to active intellect].

It is worth noting that the meaning of intellectual pleasure mentioned above is in fact referred to Ibn Sina’s cosmological doctrine, which means that whoever manages to understand and to accept the truth of this doctrine will attain perfection and enjoy the highest pleasure. As for the First Being and the hierarchical order of existences on heavens and on earth, Ibn Sina has elaborated these types in Chapter I of the Shifā and in the earlier chapters of the Ishārāt. Here he recapitulates that theory in order to establish the highest pleasure achieved by the gnostic.

b) The Body as an Obstacle to the Achievement of Pleasure:

Does the gnostic manage to obtain intellectual pleasure while his soul is still in the body? To this question, Ibn Sina replies initially that, when the soul becomes occupied with sensuous or corporal things, it is prevented from attaining intellectual pleasure. (Ibid, 27)

The important point discussed here is that the soul, while in the body, must purify itself all kinds of attachments to corporeal things that are opposed to the means for happiness. By practicing this, the soul is then able to become a pure being and perhaps free itself from being affected by the bodily states, and accordingly prepares for the true happiness. This notion was also explored by Ibn Sina in Chapter 3 of the Shifā (Acts of worship) where he talked about the true pleasure and preparation to achieve it.
c) The Achievement of the Mystic:

How do the gnostic people reach the world of sacredness and enjoy the true pleasure? In section 14, Ibn Sina describes how these things take place:

The experienced gnostic, when free from the bodily affiliations and liberated from all distractions, will arrive at the world of sacredness and happiness and enjoy the highest perfection and pleasure.

Ibn Sina repeats what he has said in sections 10 and 11, that this perfection can be obtained by renouncing all bodily relationships. Physicality as reflected in the term body (al-badan), is as if they themselves have gone there and experienced the highest pleasure. (Ibid, 32)

Immediately after this passage, Ibn Sina mentions his own experience to convince his colleagues about intellectual pleasure. He says wa-quad `araftu-ha (I have experienced it, or I have knowledge of it). (Ibid, 32).

This pleasure is not completely unattainable when the soul is still in the body. Those who are occupied in contemplating the omnipotence and who keep away from all distractions, will enjoy, even while their souls are still in the bodies, a considerable share of this pleasure. It may take root in them, and divert them from anything else.

This statement indicates that the reality of pleasure (to a very considerable extent) can be attained before death and can be realized through (some form of) rational contemplation of the divine. It can occur to those who have the means for obtaining it. The reference is presumably to philosophers, who are thus perceived as a type of gnostic (`arif).

Ibn Sina then mentions another group of seekers of pleasure, whose souls have not yet obtained the truth but who are still polluted with beliefs contrary to the truth. (Ibid, 34) He uses the term al-nufus al-sālima (the healthy souls) to designate this group. This term suggest the Sufi group and it possibly reflects some Sufi practices of his time. Ibn Sina says in section 16,

The healthy souls, those which are in a state of nature (fitra), if unsullied by contact with earthly matters, when they hear a spiritual recitation (dhikr) which indicates the heavenly bodies, will be overwhelmed by a sensation which they do not understand. They will achieve ecstasy, and extreme delight, whereby they will be led to confusion and bewilderment. All of this is due to their suitability.

This matter, says Ibn Sina, has been experienced and is proven to be the best incentive (afdhāl al-bawā’ith). He whose incentive is this, will reach perfection only when he reaches perfection of his perception (al-istihbār) (Ibid), like that achieved by the higher rank of gnostic. Al-Tusi, in his commentary, says that this part demonstrates the situation of those who are preparing for perfection (al-musta‘iddin li-al-kamāl) (Ibid). The word dhikr suggests that those people are practising Sufis.

A third level of achievement is experienced by those whose incentive is praise and competition (al-hand wa al-munāfasa). They will be satisfied with what they obtain. (Ibid, 35) The last group Ibn Sina discusses is the stupid (ordinary?) people (al-billa). They also may attain a happiness that is appropriate to them, if they manage to purify their souls. However, they still need the help of the body (jism) which would be the subject of their imaginations of the heavenly bodies or the like, but, in the end, possibly, their souls may be ready to gain the true happiness which is that enjoyed by the gnostics. (Ibid, 36)

This chapter was written to discuss and establish what is the highest and the true happiness for man. Of three kinds of pleasure – sensuous, inward, and intellectual – Ibn Sina establishes the last one as the highest. This pleasure is available to those who manage to rise above the ordinary beliefs and practices of the rest, that is the gnostics. Such people obtain intellectual pleasure when the splendour of the First Truth becomes manifest in their intellect and, as a consequence, all existences will also take form in it. There are further groups who have partial access to this experience, of which the highest is the ordinary Sufi. The higher-ranking Sufis are probably philosophers.

According to Prof. J. Hauben, the Sufis, in their endeavour to bridge the gulf between themselves and God use dhikr as a preparatory stage to invite God’s grace through recollection and silence in their souls. He quotes al-Ghazali, who says,
After sitting down in solitude (the Sufi) leaves not off from saying with his mouth “God, God”, continually and consciously till he arrives at a state when the movement of his tongue ceases and till he sees the word as running over it (the tongue). Then he comes to the point of effacing each trace of the word on the tongue and he finds his heart continually applied at dhikr, he perseveres therein till he arrives at effacing from his heart the image of the pronouncement of the letters and the form of the word till the meaning of the word alone remains in his heart, present in it, as joined to him and not leaving him.

Then al-Ghazali concludes quite rightly:

It is in power of the Sufi to reach this limit and to make endure this state while repulsing temptation; but it is not in his power to draw to himself the Mercy of God most high.

For more detailed information, see J. Houben, “Avicenna and Mysticism” in Avicenna Commemoration Volume, 205-244.

Conclusion:

Ibn Sina has systematically discussed the philosophy and the concept of pleasure and happiness. For him pleasure has been divides into three types (i) sensual pleasure (al-ladhdha al-hissiya) such as sex and eating, (ii) inward pleasure (al-ladhdha al-batina) such as preserving one’s dignity and self-respect, and (iii) intellectual pleasure (al-ladhdha al-‘aqliyya). Of the three, Ibn Sina is seriously concerned only with intellectual pleasure. This pleasure is the highest of all and it can be achieved by the gnostic (’arif) and enjoy true happiness. Meanwhile number (i) and (ii) can be enjoyed by other people. The ordinary people also can achieve happiness if they manage to purify their souls.

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