

## Yahya Ibn Adi on Happiness

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**Abstract:** Yahya Ibn Adi was among Christian scholars who especially distinguished themselves in the 10/11th century in Baghdad. He was no longer relying on the caliphs but found his own means of living which in turn prolonged his own academic interest. Consequently, he was no mere translator any more but genuine scholar. He was not only the leader of his group but was also dubbed as the best Christian translator, logician and theologian of his times. This is justified, in addition, by his ample productivity in those fields of enquiry. A considerable number of such works have evidently been used by contemporary and later writers and have also reached us today. Hence, researchers consider that it is in these aspects that his distinctive contributions to scholarship lie and therefore he deserves more serious study. The present study discusses Yahya Ibn Adis theory of happiness (al-Saadah) as reflected in his major work on ethics, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq (The refinement of character). It confines itself to discussing the concept of happiness and to finding out the answer to those particular questions regarding its nature such as what is meant by happiness or what does happiness consist of? Why is happiness the end to be achieved by man and for which sake he was created? Is happiness attainable in this life or the next? Who is the happy man? and so forth.

**Key words:** Happiness, ethics, akhlaq, al-Saadah, eudaimonia, Yahya Ibn Adi

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### INTRODUCTION

Yahya's ethical work, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq, was written mainly to assist the seekers of philosophy in realising happiness by means of acquiring traits of noble character or to put it more simply by the acquisition of philosophical ideas of how man may control the bad urges of both parts of his very nature beginning with the desire in his inner part, that is the soul which is later actualised by the reaction of his outer part that is his bodily actions. This study seeks to make an exhaustive study of such an influential work on ethics with the purpose of elucidating its views concerning happiness; the supreme aim of human life as well as its views on the ways by which man may achieve a noble state of character so as to attain such a great goal.

The central problem of philosophical ethics is the problem of happiness (al-Saada). It is the greatest good, the good without any qualification self sufficient in nature, the good that is sought for itself not for anything else. It is the greatest good, the completion of virtue and the end of perfection beyond which there is no end. Since, happiness is widely accepted as the ultimate aim of human life (Aristotle, 1980) and since this aim can only be realised by the improvement of the human soul or through ethico-religious practices, ethics then consistently occupies a central place in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Other subjects such as politics and economics are

connected with ethics, basically, either in a supportive role or as its backgrounds (Quasem, 1981; Hourani, 1985).

Happiness, the highest goal of ethics and for which the latter becomes the science par-excellence, has also turned out to be the ideal of almost all branches of science and is fundamental to many of these religious societies, especially in the medieval period. In politics, for instance, the ruler is not only accountable for the security of life and property of his subjects but above all for the attainment of their happiness (Plato, 1974; Mahdi, 1969; Aquinas, 1963). In Islam as Rosenthal (1958) puts it, the ruler combines political with spiritual authority in Christianity, the functions are divided between the emperor and the pope in Judaism authority rests with the rabbis until the Messianic kingdom is established.

The term al-Saada (happiness) is definitely not Greek, although the Aristotelian idea of eudaimonia (usually translated as happiness) may have influenced its development. It is derived from the Quranic (11:105, 108) words, *saidu* (those who are blessed or made happy) and *said* (happy one). It is a wider concept than happiness that comprehends all aspects of life. That is why other Quranic terms which convey the significant meaning of al-Saada such as al-Falah (prosperity), al-Fawz (success), al-Salamah (safety), al-Najah (salvation), al-Nimah (blessing), al-Rahmah (mercy) and their like are also used as synonyms of the term happiness. Yet, the Quranic (32:17) verse which reads:

Now no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden (in reserve) for them as a reward for their (good) deeds

is very often quoted in this connection, perhaps in order to give the concept of al-Saada a much more Quranic colour or to confirm the source of its derivation.

As for the development of Yahya's theory of happiness and how it can be achieved by man, it is undoubtedly influenced by Aristotle though different in detail and especially by his major works on ethics such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*, *Eudemean Ethics* and others. Miskawayh, for example, admits that Aristotle was the discoverer of the notion of happiness while Yahya (1966) in the same line asserts that this ideal may be attained only by means of Aristotelian logic. Although, it is still uncertain whether Aristotle's major works on ethics had been translated into Arabic or not by Yahya's time, nevertheless researchers have clear evidence that his major works on ethics, *Magna Moralia*, *Ethica Nicomachea* and *Eudemean Ethics* had reached the Arabic philosophers of the time. Perhaps, they were available either in Greek original, in Syriac or Arabic translation or in commentaries such as those of Porphyry and Themistius as well as in summaries like those of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Nicolaus of Damascus (1st century AD) and by the Alexandrines.

Ibn al-Nadim (Dodge, 1970) who appears to have known most about the transmission of Greek sciences to the Arabs, especially during Yahya's time tells us that Aristotle's ethics (*Akhlaq*) which consists of 12 Chapters probably Section 10 of the *Ethica Nicomachea* and 2 Sections of the *Magna Moralia* had been translated by Ishaq Ibn Hunayn. It is very likely that this translation was made by Ishaq from Greek or Syriac into Arabic since as a translator he was mentioned by Ibn al-Nadim as being specialised in this particular respect.

Although, Yahya was only concerned with the ideas he wished to communicate, so that nowhere did he list in *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* any sources or authors on whom he depended. His boon companion Ibn al-Nadim informs us that the same ethical work or works of Aristotle together with the commentaries of Porphyry and of Themistius were quite familiar to him. Some of the sections, particularly from the commentary of Themistius, were even reported to have been in his possession. Hence, there is the possibility that Yahya could have used Aristotle's ethical works when writing his own parallel work under discussion. This is demonstrated, in addition, by the broad similarities between his views and those of Aristotle on some crucial problems such as the supreme end of man, i.e., happiness. Further, since Yahya (1978)

devoted his school almost exclusively to the study of the works of the Greeks especially Aristotle and since he viewed ethics as the sole practical way by which happiness is realisable by man, it is highly likely that Aristotle's ethics was among his chief interests.

## THE NATURE OF MAN

Yahya (1978) believes that man is a combination of two parts which are the soul and the body. He occupies a position midway between animals and angels as he contains within himself the faculties of both the former and the latter. Like animals, he is appetitive and sensitive; like angels, he is rational. Hence, reasoning, passions and appetites are an organic part of his nature. He can either rise to the level of the angels by the help of his reasoning power, that is his soul, or he can diminish himself to the level of animals by surrendering to his passions, appetites or other sorts of bodily desires. The idea that man takes up the middle position between the angel and the animal resembling the former through the perfection of the rational part of his soul and descending to the level of the latter by surrendering to its irrational parts is actually the common view among the Arabic and earlier philosophers particularly the ethicists (Al-Tusi, 1964).

Notwithstanding, the fact that Yahya does not develop his ideas of man's corporeal body in his *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, it is evident that this study is utterly built upon his conception of the soul. Hence, it is particularly interesting to see at this stage, how he implicitly relates his theory of the faculties of the human soul with that of human happiness.

Like his predecessors, Plato (1974) and others, Yahya (1978) considers that the soul is made up of three parts or faculties which are: the rational (*al-Natiqah*); the irascible (*al-Ghadabiyyah*) and the concupiscent (*al-Shahwaniyyah*). These three faculties which are sometimes regarded by Yahya as three souls are the powers that determine all human characters and actions. The over development of one may affect or nullify the powers of the others, for they are distinct from one another. Hence according to Yahya, the diversity of people's characters some being good, some being bad and still others being neither good nor bad is due to the differences of the faculties of the souls that overshadow them. For example, if they permit themselves to be led by the rational soul, they will certainly be knowledgeable, reasonable and virtuous. But, in contrast, if they let their rational powers be conquered by either the irascible or the concupiscent or by both of these beastly faculties, there will indeed be no difference between them and the brute

animals except only in physical appearance for they allow themselves to be overcome by anger, passions, appetites and other bestial idiosyncrasies which are more peculiar to animals than human.

Thus, man becomes man by virtue of his soul not by his body (Yahya, 1978). But, since man is naturally endowed with three souls or three faculties of the soul, Yahya accordingly claims that only by virtue of the rational faculty does man become human (insanan), differ from animals and deserve to be considered as man. For the rational soul is peculiar to man while the rest the irascible and the concupiscent, as it have just been indicated earlier, are shared by both man and animals. The rational soul then is the noblest of the three parts of the soul and of the two substances of man which are the soul and the body. Hence, it is by means of this faculty alone that man is capable of preventing and rectifying the vices of the other integral parts of his nature and eventually rising to the higher level possible to him. Man, then, is nothing but his rational soul.

Although, man is man because of his rational soul, this does not mean that he can ever be superior to his fellow human beings because each of them is equally endowed with the same soul. His real status, in this case, is dependent exclusively on the care that he has devoted to the improvement of this faculty through which he possesses thought, discernment and judgement or it is contingent on the extent to which he has developed and strengthened its virtuous nature with knowledge (ulum) and good manners (adab), a knowledge of how to refine his character or of how he may curb the irascible and the concupiscent powers by the rational faculty so as to enable him to attain a noble state of the soul which is called akhlaq (character). When this state is realisable by man, all his actions become virtuous for such a state produces nothing but the good (Yahya, 1978).

Thus, man is distinct from his fellowmen by improving his soul which guarantees him good character and virtuous actions. All of these together constitute his perfection (al-Kamal or al-Tamam). The end of this perfection is called al-Saada (happiness). Hence, a significant connection between happiness and the three faculties of the human soul is now established (Yahya, 1978).

### **HAPPINESS AND ITS MEANS**

On the question of what is happiness or what does it consist of, Yahya gives us almost no clue. Neither does he attempt to define what he means by the term al-Saada (happiness) nor has he linked it with other expressions such as al-Tamam (completion), al-Kamal (perfection) and

al-Fadail (virtues) which occur many times in the Tahdhib al-Akhlaq, usually in the same context as al-Saada. Nevertheless, his theory of happiness can roughly be stated as follows:

Since, man is in fact his rational soul and since this soul is called rational only because it possesses the virtue of the rational, viz., knowledge it follows then that man's happiness must also lie in the virtue of his soul; the best part of him as happiness is the best of virtue. Indeed, when man's soul is blended with all virtues and untainted with any defects pulled by no vice, it reaches a degree of perfection in its existence. Its possessor is, then, called the perfect man (al-Insan al-Tamm). But such a man, Yahya (1978) continues has still to acquire another rank which is the highest of all ranks possible to man, that is happiness. For this reason, happiness is the end of virtue, the end of perfection and the end of all things. It is the good that is pursued for its own sake not for anything else. It is therefore self sufficient and the true leadership (al-Riasa al-Haqiqah) that keeps its master fairly praised and of good reputation forever. This conception of happiness is yet again of Aristotle (1980)'s origin. He writes happiness must be placed among those desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for the sake of something else for happiness does not lack anything but is self sufficient. Al-Farabi repeats almost the same view felicity (happiness) is the good which is pursued for its own sake and it is never at any time pursued for (the sake of) obtaining something else through it and there is nothing greater beyond it for man to obtain.

Yet again a significant connection between virtue (al-Fadila), perfection (al-Kamal or al-Tamam) and (al-Saada) is implicitly established by Yahya, namely, that man is in fact his rational soul. But, this soul is rational only owing to its virtue. Hence, man's soul exists for nothing but for the sake of virtue. It follows then that virtue is also for the sake of a much higher end than itself that is perfection. And even perfection is not yet an end in itself but for the sake of still another end, this time the last of the ends, i.e., happiness. Therefore, happiness is the end of all ends and all good things, beyond which there is no other end. This is in line with the way that Al-Farabi (1961) expresses his own understanding of Aristotle's related ideas:

For the body is for the sake of the soul and the soul for the sake of the last perfection, viz. happiness which is virtue, hence the soul is for the sake of wisdom and virtue

As for the question of why happiness is the end of man and why it is that for which that he was created Yahyas (1978), answer is quite simple. Only by virtue of

the soul, the end or the best of which is called happiness or that is to say only by happiness, in fact, are men superior to others and not by way of wealth money or fortune as the ignorant and foolish people would always believe. Wealth distinguishes the condition of man not his soul. When wealth departs from him, he loses not only its value but also his honour. For such an honour belongs to his wealth and not his soul. Hence, wealth, riches, money, property and their like denote only an exterior state while the soul itself the true essence of man gains no advantage from them. They have no value of their own but people acquire them avidly not for their own gain but rather for the status and comfort that can be obtained through them.

Besides, Yahya (1978) argues riches are still good for the virtuous man because he can use them to relieve need and to help all noble causes stimulating his generosity while they are deadly to the vicious person through the ease whereby the passions are satisfied. Most bad habits, forbidden things and lustful desires become possible only by means of money. The virtuous rich man will be restrained from them by his soul, the wicked will have no controller but gains them via his money whereas the poor will have little chance of being involved in them, even though he has a strong desire to do so for he has no money. Thus, Yahya appears to have preferred the virtuous to the wicked even if the former is very poor while the latter is exceptionally rich. But, the best of all men, is the one who is virtuous and himself wealthy the perfectly happy man.

Plato also insists that wealth, riches and their like are sometimes good and sometimes bad. While, Aristotle (1980) discarded riches and external goods as true happiness but still retained them as goods facilitating the life of philosophy and as unqualified aids to happiness. Yahya's Muslim predecessors such men as Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi also maintain the same view with some alterations. The former regards material wealth as a property loaned to man by God. Being in this situation, man should therefore possess and use them in the same manner as the other things that are lent to him (Atiyeh, 1966). The later, on whom Yahya seems to have depended, claims that wealth is an unconditional means towards the attainment of some ends. It is not, however, an end in itself but it is sought for something else. As to Yahya's successors such men as Al-Ghazali, Thomas Aquinas (Johnson, 1989) and others appear to have been in agreement with these views in principle. Al-Ghazali emphasises the way that these riches should be acquired and used whereas Thomas Aquinas emphasises the idea that the wealth has no value of its own but it is desired for the sake of something else as does Al-Farabi.

As to whether happiness is attainable in this life or not or whether it is realisable by man only in the life to come or in both conditions, Yahya (1978) leaves us in ignorance. The only hint is his statement that though happiness is scarcely ever reached by man it is still possible. Again, he does not specify in which life this potential could be actualised. But, since he has also said that he who spends his wealth according to its due is demonstrating parts of happiness, this may suggest that this ideal is possible even in the present world. But that the next world could also be his meaning is not entirely ruled out for Yahya also believes in the continuity or the immortality (baqa) of man after death. However, this speculative argument should never be regarded as conclusive.

With reference to the question of what is the characteristic of the perfect man (al-Insan al-Tamm) or what sort of man might deserve to be called a happy man, Yahya (1978) defines him as follows. The perfect man is he who is adorned with all virtues and untainted with any defect. Again, it is an ideal seldom attained by man. However, when man reaches this limit indeed he more resembles the angels than the human being. For man was burdened with various defects of his nature that incline him to evil (rather than good). This perfect man, Yahya (1978) adds, is he who always inspects all his character, who guards himself from all sorts of vices that could corrupt his nature and who is passionately in love with perfection, practises his virtues and enjoys great pleasure in so doing. Thus, he reaches the highest stage of his perfection that is happiness in which he shares the rank of the angels and by which he gains an everlasting reputation.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Yahya's theory is that man is perfect if he possesses only virtue and is without vice and thereby he gains happiness and that happiness is the most complete thing that is sought for its own sake, not for anything else. Riches, material wealth and even virtue are seen only as conditional aids to happiness. This theory has, without doubt, been influenced by Aristotle to some extent. But, Al-Farabi's domination in the broadest sense of the theory is more conspicuous. For instance, Al-Farabi writes:

The first perfection is that a man does the actions of all the virtues not that he is merely endowed with a virtue without performing its actions and the perfection consists in his acting not in his acquiring the qualities by which the actions come as the perfection of the secretary is that he performs the actions of writing not that he acquires the art of

writing and the perfection of the doctor that he performs the actions of medicine not that he acquires the art of medicine merely and similarly (with) every art. This perfection affords us the last perfection which is ultimate happiness, i.e., the absolute good. It is that which is chosen and desired for itself and is not chosen, at any time whatever, for the sake of anything else. All else is chosen for its use in the attainment of happiness. Everything is good when it is useful for the attainment of happiness and whatever interferes with happiness in any way is bad

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