

From Speculative to the Spiritual Happiness: The Sufi Understanding of Felicity (*al-Sa'āda*) Based on Gnosis

Spekülatif Mutluluktan Asal Mutluluğa: Sufilikte Mârifete Dayalı Mutluluk Anlayışı

Nurullah KOLTAŞ (*)


Abstract

Attaining felicity or happiness is among the most common ideals that people belonging to different religious traditions or schools of thought have pondered on from early ages. Although they assumed different stances as to the quiddity of felicity, it can be inferred from their views that some of the philosophers thought it to be a reality pertaining only to this world whereas a large group of people, including Muslim thinkers, consider happiness as a necessary goal to be achieved in the Hereafter. Sufis also emphasize the importance of otherworldly happiness or bliss, but the works of many of them such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), and Mullā Şadrā (d. 1050/1641), which are based on both speculative and transcendental Sufi theory and practice, emphasize the importance of a happiness based on *mā'rifāh*. According to these Sufis, the goal of felicity is closeness to God (*qurb*) in the Hereafter. Therefore, happiness or felicity is not just “happiness” as conceived in the modern understanding that reduces it to a worldly matter. In this respect, the Sufis have adopted a way of thinking and practice that leads people to spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*) that will lead them to happiness in the essential sense on both the material and spiritual levels. In this article, the general understanding of happiness, which gives the impression of a hedonistic nature, will be compared with the conception of happiness or

* ORCID: [0000-0003-3167-1045](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3167-1045). Prof. Dr., İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi, E-posta: nkoltas@hotmail.com.

Received : 27.03.2026
Accepted : 05.05.2026
Published : 31.05.2026

Cite as: Nurullah Koltas, “From Speculative to the Spiritual Happiness: The Sufi Understanding of Felicity (*al-Sa'āda*) Based on Gnosis,” *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies* 5, 1 (2026): pp.

 This article is distributed under license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

felicity envisioned especially by the Sufis who express remarkable observations on morality. In this framework, the views of early Sufi authors such as al-Hujwiri (d. 465/1072?) and al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072), who generally prioritized otherworldly happiness, as well as the views of later Sufi authors such as al-Ghazzali, Ibn al- Arabi, and Mulla Sadra, who combined rational principles with spiritual attainments on happiness, will be discussed in the context of an understanding of happiness focused on being virtuous along with attaining perfection and Divine knowledge or gnosis in Sufism.

Keywords: Felicity, happiness, gnosis, perfection, spiritual realization (*tahqiq*)

Özet

Saadet ya da mutluluğa ulaşmak, farklı dinlere ya da düşünce ekollerine mensup birçok kişinin idealleri arasında yer almaktadır. Mutluluğun mâhiyeti konusunda farklı birtakım tavırlar benimsenmiş olsa da ortaya konan görüşlerden hareketle, bazı filozoflar mutluluğu bu dünyaya ait bir gerçeklik olarak düşünürken, Müslüman düşünürlerin de içinde yer aldığı geniş bir kesim, mutluluğu âhirette erişilmesi gerekli bir gaye addeder. Sufiler de uhrevî mutluluğa ya da saâdetin önemi üzerinde durmakla birlikte, gerek spekülâtif gerekse aşkın bir tasavvuf teorisi ve pratiğini temel alan Gazzâlî (ö. 505/1111), İbn ‘Arabî (ö. 638/1240) ve Mollâ Sadrâ (ö. 1050/1641) gibi birçok sufînin eserlerinde, *mârifete* dayalı bir mutluluğun önemi üzerinde durulmaktadır. Bahsi geçen sufîlere göre mutluluğun gayesi, âhirette Hakk’a yakınlıktır (*kurb*). Dolayısıyla mutluluk, onu dünyevî bir meseleye indirgeyen modern anlayışta tasavvur edildiği şekliyle öylesi bir “mutluluk”tan ibâret değildir. Bu bakımdan sufiler, *mârifet* yoluyla insanları maddî ve manevî düzlemlerde aslî mânâda mutluluğa ulaştıracak *tahkîke* sevk eden bir düşünce ve pratik benimsemişlerdir. Bu makalede, hazcı bir tabiat izlenimi veren genel mutluluk anlayışı, ahlâk alanında eser veren ve tespitlerde bulunan bazı sufiler tarafından tasavvur edilen mutluluk anlayışıyla karşılaştırılacaktır. Dolayısıyla, farklı dönemlerde yaşamış filozoflar tarafından mutluluğa dair ortaya konan mutluluk yaklaşımlarından ziyade Hücvîrî (ö. 465/1072?), Kuşeyrî (ö. 465/1072) gibi erken dönem sufi müelliflerin genel itibarıyla uhrevî mutluluğu önceleyen görüşlerinin yanında Gazzâlî, İbnü’l- Arabî ve Mollâ Sadrâ gibi aklî ilkelerle kalbî müktesebatı birleştiren sonraki dönem sufi müelliflerin mutluluğa dair görüşleri, sufilikte mârifet odaklı bir mutluluk anlayışı sadedinde ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Saadet, mutluluk, mârifet, kemâl, tahkîk

1. Introduction

The longstanding quest for happiness has been a crucial issue for the human beings. The attainment of it, thus, has become the goal of human life in all strata of people ranging from the philosophers to the ordinary people with an average lifespan. Although there exist certain common grounds as to the source of happiness, certain distinctions and classifications were made from different perspectives. Some deployed an approach focusing on the worldly types of happiness whereas others suggested the sublime roots of it and expounded its source in terms of a virtual life, the elements of which were laid by the philosophical tradition. The actualisation of it was presented through the combination of reason and the practical aspects consistent with the intellect. However, some of the philosophers offered a way along with the latter referring to the fact that the religious tradition shares much of the philosophical stand in evaluating the possibility of a virtuous state or society by taking both the worldly and otherworldly types of happiness. Thus, the pursuit of eternal and everlasting happiness was a key tenet of various spiritual groups throughout history, including the Sufis. These individuals sought to forge a close connection with the divine, perceiving happiness as a state of attaining Divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and proximity (*qurb*). In their understanding, happiness (*sa'āda*) signifies proximity, while misery (*shaqāwa*) represents distance (*bu'd*).¹

It should be noted that the Arabic word *sa'āda* (سعادة) can be rendered depending on the context as felicity, joy, delight, happiness, etc., all of which deal with a sense of happiness in various ways. However, it is often stated that this word implies a life centred on being lucky, goodness and happiness as a whole, rather than rejoicing and delight in the ordinary sense of the word. Alternately, the term happiness is translated as the fulfillment of something desired and striven in this realm. Accordingly, the English rendering of *sa'āda* as 'happiness' in view of the mentioned fulfillment² lacks something from the original meaning of the term. Therefore, we prefer the term "felicity" in general despite the fact that there are many other terms used to refer happiness. Another significant concern in terms of happiness is that it can be shared by the human beings and the animals whereby it is often defined as "joy" or desire. Our main aim is to put forth the relation between the happiness stemming from the knowledge as such and the happiness in the ordinary sense of the term to discover the possibility of

¹ Roxanne D. Marcotte, "The Order of Happiness," in *Monotheism and Ethics: Historical and Contemporary Intersections Among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Yitshak Tsevi Langerman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 159–60.

² Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness (fī ma'rifat kīmiyā' al-sa'āda)*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein (Chicago: Anqa Publishing, 2019), 19.

attaining felicity through gnosis in an age of turmoil bereft of essential wisdom that would yield people to the perfection needed for the soul to become felicitous. This relation, then, should also be evaluated in terms of ecstatic and speculative aspects rather than mere rhetorical approaches those are meant to define happiness.

2. Felicity As the Perfection of the Soul

Many philosophers have pointed at the intended end of all acts as the perfection of one's soul. Hence, the soul must be perfected in accordance with a purpose. For some, this purpose is identified as *eudaimonia*, which is translated as happiness, and *ataraxia*, a term defined as calmness. These two terms are considered to be attained as one reaches mental peace and serenity, which refers to a state of being in need of nothing.³ *Eudaimonia* as perfect felicity is also linked with *arête*, a word in Greek that denotes virtue and excellence.⁴ When felicity is regarded as the main goal of perfection, the realization of the quiddity of felicity and goodness leads to a desire in view of an incomplete or deficient attitude towards seeking the perfection. For the seeker, the joy and delight towards the sought goal may increase when this emergent desire becomes dominant.⁵ Viewed from this respect, virtues and vices play an important role in determining the superiority among the human beings.

Many classifications regarding felicity were made to reveal the cruciality of virtues for establishing a praiseworthy society. Otherwise, we would think of a single felicity that belongs to one who studied all fields of philosophy and learnt all sorts of art along with participation into wisdom more than anyone else, which amounts to saying that the rest have nothing to do with happiness and possess no goal.⁶ In other words, there would be no need for education if there exists no reason to be felicitous.⁷

It can be conferred from the above that the multiplicity in terms of felicity is quite natural. Otherwise, there would be one type possessed by only one person, that's to say, the rest have no goal and felicity accordingly. In this regard, we can assume that apart from the common features like "delight" or "enjoyment" between the human beings and the animals such as

³ William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics: Epictetus and Happiness as Freedom (Continuum Studies in Ancient Philosophy 1)* (London: Continuum, 2007), 141.

⁴ Brendan Cook, *Pursuing Eudaimonia: Re-Appropriating the Greek Philosophical Foundations of the Christian Apophatic Tradition* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 1.

⁵ Naşir ad-Dīn Tūsī, *The Nasirean Ethics*, trans. G. M. Wickens (London: George Allen&Unwin Ltd., 1964), 59.

⁶ John Peter Radez, *Ibn Miskawayh, the Soul, and the Pursuit of Happiness* (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 53.

⁷ İbn Miskeveyh, *Mutluluk ve Felsefe*, ed. Hümeyra Özturan, (İstanbul: Klasik, 2017), 57.

eating and drinking, the complete felicity should involve something of virtuousness. The common type of felicity among the human beings in view of *human qua human* (*min haythu huwa al-insān*) is that the actions emerge *vis à vis* something determined as moderate through consideration, differentiation, and intellection. Thus, this common type is intended for everyone, and it can be attained to the extent that one has a certain awareness of what is good and bad, and of the levels of virtues and vices. When we say, “someone is superior to another one,” this signifies that the person in question is superior in terms of virtues. When a person lacks virtues, it would not be possible to call that person a human being. Although the human beings were given felicity in their primordial nature, they excel each other by effectuating virtues to the degree that they utilise the felicity in their nature. However, the felicity of a rich or poor person differs from each other regarding their states although the formation of their acts is identical. Everyone should be oriented to the inherent felicity in a perfect and virtuous manner as much as possible.⁸ The philosophers explained the pursued felicity especially within the intellectual context as the intellect conveys a perfection reflecting the supra-human nature.

2.1. Theoretical Perfection (*Kamāl*) or Intellectual Felicity

The human beings occupy an intermediary position between the lowest state of animals and the highest state of angelic beings. Therefore, some natural qualities such as bodily desires, eating and drinking etc. resemble to the animals whereas the intellection, knowledge, servitude, truthfulness -all of which are related to the desired moral traits- are akin to the characteristics pertaining to the angels. In this sense, the human beings gathered both animal and angelic capacities within them. If one lacks intellection, he/she cannot have the capacity required for worshipping and finding ways to be in Divine proximity. And if one is deprived of bodily needs like the angels, then there would be no way of cultivating the arts.⁹

That’s why the existence of the intellectual faculties is nobler than that of animal faculties including anger and concupiscence. In that vein, the intellectual felicity is more sublime and the joy emerging from it is more complete compared to that of animal faculties. When the soul becomes perfect and its interaction with the body ceases, it will be drawn towards its true

⁸ İbn Miskeveyh, *Mutluluk ve Felsefe*, 54–56.

⁹ Râgıb el-İsfahânî, *Mutluluğun Kazanılması* (İstanbul: Sufi Kitap, 2022), 54–55.

essence. This will bring about a happiness that far surpasses the joy and delight experienced through the senses. This is a sign of the dignity of the cause behind it.¹⁰

Some theories focus on the purpose of each act, relating it to the positive outcome that is synonymous with “felicity”. When the awareness emerges concerning the nature of good and felicity in cases of deficiency, this awareness evokes a yearning for perfectness to be reached as the goal of the act.¹¹ Not only the existence but also the awareness of it is good and felicitous. Insofar as the existences are of different levels of perfection, the felicity in them increases at degrees pursuant to the completeness of existence. If the existence (*wujūd*) is complete, then its privation from non-existence (*‘adam*) becomes excessive. Accordingly, the imperfectness of it leads to pain due to the intervention of evil. As the felicities are perceptions of the existents, their level of nobility -as well as goodness- varies thereof.¹² According to some philosophers including Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), the perfection of the human soul is defined primarily as the actualization of the theoretical intellect. According to this line of thought, the soul’s perfection consists in becoming an “intellectual world” (*‘ālam ‘aqlī*) that mirrors the entire macrocosmic order.¹³ This involves acquiring the forms of all existents, from the First Principle down to the material. The mentioned perfection is achieved through an arduous process of learning and discursive thought (*fikr*), where the intellect abstracts universal meanings from matter.¹⁴ As the intellect reaches at its peak -hence “the acquired intellect” (*al-‘aql al-mustafād*)- the soul arrives at a state of relative independence from materiality. Happiness (*sa‘āda*) is the result of this intellectual completion, which yields the most intense and eternal pleasure.¹⁵ Lack of happiness is no longer, as we might anticipate, a condition of being wretched on account of extreme destitution, discomfort and so forth. But beings is enough to be unhappy, even if you have got everything you could ever wish for in the way of worldly possessions.¹⁶ Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) prioritizes the purification of the soul from vices with regard to virtues. For those who embrace this line of thought, happiness is defined in the context of intellectual delight based on theoretical perfection. Ibn Sīnā also believes that practical and moral development will reduce the suffering (*shaqāwa*)

¹⁰ Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā), *Al-Ḥikma al-muta‘āliya fī-l-asfār al-‘aqliyya al-arba‘a* (Beirut: Dār al-ihyā al-turāth al-‘Arabī, 1990), IX: 121-122.

¹¹ Ṭūsī, *The Nasirean Ethics*, 59.

¹² Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-Ḥikma al-muta‘āliya*, IX: 121-122.

¹³ Janne Mattila, *The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 83–84.

¹⁴ Herbert Alan Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 124.

¹⁵ Mattila, *The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna*, 57.

¹⁶ Julia Elisabeth Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 417–18.

resulting from the soul's attachment to the material sphere, and thus considers it merely a condition for happiness. Consequently, the aforementioned purification is regarded as virtuous because it fulfills the function of purifying the soul from physical attachments. Virtues alone may not lead to happiness; the purpose of virtue is to prevent the soul from becoming attached to bodily pleasures. They are important not because they ensure the attainment of happiness, but because they ensure freedom from suffering. In short, vices lead to suffering, while virtues—arising through theoretical perfection—can be seen merely as conditions for happiness. After all, the happiness of someone occupying a high theoretical position can be destroyed by vices.¹⁷

Most of the philosophers mentioned the primacy of felicity in philosophical parlance insisting on the moral and material means. A principal motive that leads philosophers to pave the way to felicity is that all sciences share a common benefit, namely the preparation of the soul for the perfection in act as well as for the happiness for the Hereafter.¹⁸

2.2. Felicity in the Hereafter

It is a fact that some Muslim philosophers followed the Greek philosophical heritage and developed it assuming that the thought cumulatively advances through “heirs” as continuation. The Platonic understanding of virtues, for example, were evaluated within a context that reverberates the standpoint of happiness as a reality concerning the Hereafter rather than being a mundane phenomenon.¹⁹ According to them, the human beings were endowed with the capacity to attain the felicity in the world as well as in the Hereafter. In fact, the ideas pertaining to the heritage in question were not alien but compatible with the Islamic perspective. That's why many philosophers such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā employed Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian ideas as they developed them so as to establish their own line of thought. A key distinction here is that happiness is not earthly but, as seen in the work of philosophers such as al-Fārābī, otherworldly in nature.²⁰ Those who ascribe felicity a

¹⁷ Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 124–25.

¹⁸ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 13.

¹⁹ Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University (IIUM), 2006), 34.

²⁰ Amir Saemi, *Morality and Revelation in Islamic Thought and Beyond: A New Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 125.

primacy lead the ideal society.²¹ For al-Fārābī, what enables the humanity (lit. the citizens in the cities) and nations attain the felicity in this world and the highest felicity in the Hereafter are theoretical virtues, intellectual virtues, moral values and practical arts.²² In an investigation to grasp what and how the perfectness attained as the goal, one faces the means to reach them: goodness (*khayrāt*), virtues (*fadhāil*) and noble character traits (*ḥasanāt*). On the other hand, it should be clarified that what prevents one to attain these are evil (*shurūr*), vices (*naqā'īs*) and unpraiseworthy attitudes (*sayyi'āt*). The science of civilisation (*al-‘ilm al-madaniyya*) helps each citizen to learn what, how and why these exist and for what reason they serve. This is the science that enables felicity in accordance with one’s capacity.²³ Similarly, Ibn Sīnā states that human soul needs morality and actions for attaining felicity of the Hereafter along with wisdom.²⁴ All sciences share the benefit of enabling the soul to reach at perfection, this means to prepare the soul for felicity in the Hereafter.²⁵ Only by fulfilling the theoretical aspect of the soul, by acquiring virtues that have the capacity to purify the soul, and by avoiding vices, one can purify the soul and attain its goal, which is otherworldly felicity.²⁶ However, some of the Muslim philosophers including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī and Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. circa 400/1010) took a different stand towards the mentioned legacy, and they transformed only the ideas or principles those comply with the Qur’ānic view. This outlook has certain resemblances with the one adopted by the Sufis as they define the goal of the spiritual journey in terms of the realization of the Truth and attaining felicity leading to the Divine contentment. For, unhappiness stems from disillusionment with worldly ambitions, which, as is the case with other groups, is a situation that is not appreciated by the Sufis.²⁷

At this point, it can be argued that philosophers and Sufis share similar views. However, they also disagree on a number of issues concerning felicity. Ibn Sīnā’s theoretical perfection relies on “reflective powers,” which Sufis view as a “veil” (*ḥijāb*) that can lead to confusion. In contrast, gnosis is “knowledge-by-presence” (*al-‘ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), where there is no gap between the knower and the known.²⁸ The Sufis often note that the word for reason (*‘aql*) is

²¹ Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 304.

²² Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-sa‘āda*, ed. Ali Būmalham (Beirut: Dāru Maktaba al-Hilāl, 1995), 25.

²³ Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-sa‘āda*, 46.

²⁴ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, 22.

²⁵ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, 13.

²⁶ Majid Fakhri, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 86.

²⁷ Imam Birgivi, *The Path of Muhammad: A Book on Islamic Morals and Ethics by Imam Birgivi*, trans. Shaykh Bayrak, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 225.

²⁸ Mukhtar H. Ali, *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-‘Arabi* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 120–21.

derived from a root meaning “to fetter” or “shackle” referring to its feature as veil.²⁹ Considering all these aspects simultaneously, it is possible to say that happiness can be handled in different dimensions. Hence, the discourse on felicity (*sa‘āda*), joy (*farah*), and satisfaction (*riḍā*) within the Sufi tradition represents a sophisticated ontological and noetic framework that distinguishes itself from purely rationalistic or worldly conceptions of well-being. By synthesizing the perspectives of al-Qushayrī, al-Hujwīrī, al-Ghazzālī, and Ibn al-‘Arabī, one can observe the gnostic foundation of happiness as the Divine knowledge inextricably linked to the knowledge (*ma‘rifā*) of God, which is considered the final end for which humanity was created. Al-Ghazzālī posits that every faculty of the human being finds pleasure in the activity for which it was designed; just as the eye delights in beauty, the rational soul’s highest function—and thus its greatest pleasure—is the “perception of truth”.³⁰ Since God is the highest possible object of knowledge, the realization of the Divine Essence constitutes the summit of human felicity. As a matter of fact, the Sufis consider happiness in terms of spiritual attainment or realisation as such.

3. The Spiritual Felicity or The Sufi Way of Attainment

The general attitude towards felicity is that it is not an end itself but something experienced permanently in this life, which is unlike the Aristotelian view reducing it to a worldly concept. In this sense, some philosophers adopted an understanding akin to that of Aristotelian line in terms of proper conduct concerning moral codes. Yet some philosophers, especially those who adopt a mundane way of life, reduce happiness to a concept concerning psychological states.

In this regard, the traditional understanding of felicity is something related considering happiness as being submission to God as a result of submission to the highest good linked with a permanent lore and action called certainty (*yaqīn*). As the certainty in Sufi terminology is related to the heart as the faculty of cognition, it denotes a sense of peace (*amn*) and tranquillity (*tuma`nīnah*) along with knowledge or gnosis (*ma‘rifā*), which enables one to love God in this world. In Sufi understanding, one cannot reach tranquillity unless the worldly connections are severed by polishing the heart (*jilā al-qalb*). For, one’s happiness is to be

²⁹ Éric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 7.

³⁰ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field (New York: Routledge, 1991), 12.

found where the tranquillity and enjoyment exist,³¹ and only those who have gnosis through knowing and coming closer to Him may achieve felicity.³²

From the outset, those who adopt the Sufi way of life have sought to attain the essential truth that is not constrained any society or period of time. Besides, the individuals also seem to trace themselves to the origin, i.e. the primordial nature as it is symbolised by “the Edenic state”. To retain the nature as such, they have searched some ways meant to abstain worldly desires, which is fuelled by momentary pleasures as it is the case with the modern circumstances today.³³ The early Sufis, or rather the renunciants (*zuhhād*), considered being entirely free from anything pertaining to the lower world such as caring the attire or material prosperity as happiness.³⁴ This activity led, in turn, to the emergence of numerous notions such as renunciation (*zuhd*), reverence (*taqwā*), penitence (*tawba*), and so on. Their motives in retaining this nature emerge from a certain quest for felicity or happiness that would serve as the goal of virtuous activities not necessarily related with this world. It should be stated that these activities are not limited to the psychological and biological level but must be envisaged as something not an end in itself but an experience having the quality of enduring during the course of life.³⁵ The quest of the Sufis for gnosis or Divine knowledge finds its expression in their inward search for the ways that can lead them an enduring happiness.

3.1. Felicity Attained Through Divine Knowledge

In Sufi circles, the general stance as to the source of felicity both in this world and in the next one is that the knowledge (*ilm*) serves as their prime means, fruit of which in the Hereafter is attaining nearness (*qurb*) to the Lord of the two worlds.³⁶ For the knowledge paves the way for salvation and happiness.³⁷ Felicity at the highest is with the proximity of God and vision of Him,³⁸ which could only be achieved through a perception evinced by faith in God and His

³¹ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 34.

³² Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn)*, ed. Muhammad Mahdi al-Sharif (Lebanon: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2011), I: 105.

³³ Pınar Ersoy Özdoğru and Hatice Dilek Güldütuna, “Genç Profesyonellerin (Z Kuşağı) Maneviyata Yaklaşımlarının Varlık, Anlam ve Amaç Boyutlarıyla Birlikte Keşfedilmesi Üzerine Bir Saha Çalışması”, *Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 4, 2 (2025): 87.

³⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 37.

³⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 34.

³⁶ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, I: 25; IV: 138.

³⁷ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, I: 97.

³⁸ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, IV: 37.

messengers along with good manners.³⁹ Viewed from this respect, the needs and desires are achieved through proper conduct, and this leads to a spiritual and permanent experience by virtuous activity, which would guide the ultimate felicity in the Hereafter, that is the Vision of God (*ru'yah*).⁴⁰ Al-Ghazzālī defines Divine Love in a similar manner. For him, one's felicity in the Hereafter is to the extent that one loves God in this world.⁴¹ To reach happiness in the Hereafter, one should purify the soul and act in accordance with justice.⁴²

Only those who possess knowledge and gnosis through closeness to Him may achieve felicity.⁴³ In this respect, al-Ghazzālī states that every created thing in the world might serve as a means of attaining felicity and happiness as well as a certain level of closeness to God. In fact, using these means in a proper way determines the servant's being thankful or being deprived of the eternal bliss.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Ibn al-'Arabī claims that the felicity and joy is not in knowledge but in perfect knowledge within faith. He adds that when these two are combined, it is possible to reach a level behind which there exists no other goal.⁴⁵ Therefore, happiness in this world is sought as an intellectual degree as well as the potential to know God.

The perfection (*kamāl*) necessitates the alchemy of happiness, which amounts to saying that all happiness lies in knowing God and this state of knowing leads to perfection.⁴⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī likens the paths of happiness (*sa'āda*) and misery (*shaqāwah*) as two ways on which the former as a clear one whereas the latter has crookedness and obscurity.⁴⁷ However, God has shown the way people to follow the lines of happiness and misery. Otherwise, everyone would be happy or miserable. But everything came into existence as He willed; however, some would be happy, and some would be miserable until the Last Day.⁴⁸ The reason for the obscurity in wretchedness or misery is ignorance and heedlessness, but felicity arises through

³⁹ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, IV: 158.

⁴⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics*, 34–36.

⁴¹ al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 88.

⁴² Sari Nusseibeh, *Avicenna's Al-Shifā'* (London: Routledge, 2018), 344.

⁴³ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, I: 105.

⁴⁴ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, IV: 138.

⁴⁵ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz Sultan al-Mansub (Cairo: al-Majlis al-a'lā li'l-thaqāfa, 2013), 8:387.

⁴⁶ Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness*, 19.

⁴⁷ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (2013), IX: 311.

⁴⁸ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz Sultan al-Mansub (Yemen: Ministry of Culture, 2010), I: 138.

gnosis.⁴⁹ Therefore, we can infer from this standpoint that the Sufi understanding of felicity incorporates tranquillity obtained by gnosis and is formulated by employing specific terms peculiar to the Sufis. Thereby, one might grasp the extent of felicity within this huge vision unlike any other terminology or discipline. The joy or happiness as an outcome of the knowledge would be more if the subject of the knowledge is higher as well. Just as one prefers learning about the secrets of a king compared to those of the viziers, the Divine knowledge causes more happiness, and one will experience the paradisaal bliss in this world if one is able to know God.⁵⁰ For al-Ghazzālī, the knowledge of God is the “alchemy of happiness” that is gained, first of all, through self-denial.⁵¹ As the Sufis consider this world as a bridge or a transient dwelling place which has to be passed for the eternal one, a wayfarer (*sālik*) on the spiritual journey cannot attain felicity unless he/she is adorned with gnosis, beautiful character traits and purification through abandoning the natural desires those prevent the thought from proper thinking and receiving the Divine sciences.⁵² Another point that should not be underestimated is that being happy and delightful necessitates purification of the heart and this purification entails hardship. Thus, the joy arising from the perfectness of the soul as such is similar to the perfection aimed by the Sufis through certain methods for the purification of the soul such as self-discipline (*riyādhah*), self-exertion (*mujāhadah*) and self-struggle (*mujādalah*) meant for methods of spiritual purification including *tazkiya*, *tasfiya*, and *takhlīya*, all of which aim at purifying and preparing the heart for the receptivity of Divine knowledge. For this reason, the heart is assigned a major role over the human faculties and body parts in numerous classical Sufi writings. Because the activities such as hearing, sight etc. are subject to the heart itself. The body serves as the vehicle of heart, which cultivates “the seeds of happiness” and makes one ready for the journey leading to the primordial state. The heart in its capacity to acquire the Divine Knowledge (*ma'rifa*) through unveiling (*mukāshafah*) comprises the happiness of it either.⁵³ In order to reach a state where one can acquire Divine knowledge, the veils preventing to reach beyond the ordinary should be removed.

For the majority of the Sufis, the unveiling or *mukāshafah* consists of certain degrees, the highest form of which is unrestricted Divine knowledge whereby felicity is attained. It can

⁴⁹ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, IV: 468.

⁵⁰ al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 84–85.

⁵¹ al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 24.

⁵² Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (2010), I: 506.

⁵³ al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 18–19.

also be said that unveiling is happiness in itself and this fact would be felt by heart in the Hereafter.⁵⁴ The next step might be called witnessing (*mushāhadah*), which enables the discernment of the real condition beyond the veils. For Mullā Ṣadrā, who seems to combine the sapiential and intuitive ways of attaining felicity, knowledge is the seed of witnessing. To realize witnessing, the veils (*hijāb*) between the human beings and the object of intellect should be unveiled to overcome ignorance by not being preoccupied with obstacles such as the body and issues concerning external senses.⁵⁵ If the soul resists to be in such a case, this is due to the ignorance and its corrupted nature. The souls, then, ought to be directed to the virtues through religion, which is against ignorance.⁵⁶

Sometimes this knowledge is likened to the light unlike the darkness dominating the ignorant. Light as felicity and happiness come out of the light of knowledge and good deeds.⁵⁷ The heart of one who possesses lore or certainty has a window that opens unto the realities pertaining to the spiritual realm; that's why he/she can perceive the source of felicity or wretchedness in the soul through discernment and witnessing. This perception is akin to the experience of a physician who knows the reason of wellness or malady and offers medicine accordingly; it becomes clear that servitude and gnosis are remedy whereas sins and ignorance are like poisons through the mentioned witnessing.⁵⁸ In another instance, a physician cures the illnesses by preparing certain remedies by means of adding or removing the materials in their mixture just as the Divine physicians, i.e. doctors, who cure and direct the morality and the soul by praised attitudes as well as certain methods such as remembrance (*dhikr*) and admonishments.⁵⁹ In the final analysis, the felicity as attaining Divine knowledge and reaching to a state of spiritual well-being through the aforementioned Sufi practices differ from mere rhetorical way of expressing happiness as it is the case with the ordinary understanding of it.

4. Conclusion

Felicity is among the most common concepts, which constituted an ideal to be attained from the early periods. Philosophers of all schools pondered on and tried to expound it from various perspectives. Muslim philosophers as well as Sufis stated different views concerning

⁵⁴ al-Ghazzālī, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, IV: 209.

⁵⁵ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-Hikma al-muta'aliya*, IX: 123.

⁵⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (2010), I: 128.

⁵⁷ William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 159–60.

⁵⁸ al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 33.

⁵⁹ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (2013), V: 375-376.

the quiddity of felicity. For the Sufis, it denotes a unique understanding according to which one's ultimate goal, i.e. the attainment of nearness to God is the real felicity unlike the modern concept of happiness that reduces felicity only to a worldly level. However, achieving such nearness or proximity necessitates an arduous effort in all phases of life. As the present conditions in all around the world define one's happiness mostly in terms of material prosperity, leading such a life would seem fantasy; for such a life will not lead to success, nor will it lead to a comfortable life on earth. Unlike the modern understanding of happiness, the Sufi way of life entails hardship and certain challenges that might seem sorrow and grief at first glance.

Those who adopt the way of Sufism seek the perfection in all stages of life. In order to achieve this perfection, one needs to attain the 'alchemy of happiness', that is to say, knowing God as Ibn al-'Arabī defines it. Only the knowledge as such can lead the seekers of truth to the desired state, both in this world and in the Hereafter. The Sufis defined and expounded the ways including the unveiling and witnessing through which one can reach felicity. In this respect, their view of felicity differs from the one envisaged by modernity in that felicity entails intellectual and spiritual aspects rather than the material means imagined by the ones adopted a mundane understanding of happiness.

Viewed from this perspective, the Sufi understanding of felicity entails the knowledge of the self, knowledge of God, the knowledge of this world and the knowledge of the next world at the same time. This lore is attained by recognizing the happiness as the pleasure of the intellect, an idea shared by all philosophers. However, knowing the soul as a Sufi ideal necessitates being aware of the alchemy of transformation that is gained through Divine knowledge or gnosis and unveiling of the secret aspects along with self-struggle and witnessing. And this way of knowing would only be possible when one assumes the angelic qualities rather than the ordinary features of the carnal soul. Apart from the other definitions pertaining to felicity, the Sufi view of felicity differs from other views in the context of Divine knowledge or gnosis.

Bibliography

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī. *Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda*. Edited by Ali Būmalham. Beirut: Dāru Maktaba al-Hilāl, 1995.

- al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995.
- Ali, Mukhtar H. *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-'Arabi*. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- Annas, Julia Elisabeth. *The Morality of Happiness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Avicenna. *The Metaphysics of The Healing*. Edited by Michael E. Marmura. Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005.
- Chittick, William. *The Self-Disclosure of God*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Cook, Brendan. *Pursuing Eudaimonia: Re-Appropriating the Greek Philosophical Foundations of the Christian Apophatic Tradition*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- Davidson, Herbert Alan. *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ersoy Özdoğru, Pınar, and Hatice Dilek Güldütuna. "Genç Profesyonellerin (Z Kuşağı) Maneviyata Yaklaşımlarının Varlık, Anlam ve Amaç Boyutlarıyla Birlikte Keşfedilmesi Üzerine Bir Saha Çalışması". *Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 4, 2 (2025): 64–94. <https://doi.org/10.32739/ustad.2025.8.86>.
- Fakhri, Majid. *Ethical Theories in Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1994.
- Geoffroy, Éric. *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*. Translated by Roger Gaetani. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010.
- al-Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥāmid. *Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn)*. Edited by Muhammad Mahdi al-Sharif. Lebanon: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2011.
- . *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Translated by Claud Field. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- el-İsfahânî, Râgıb. *Mutluluğun Kazanılması*. İstanbul: Sufi Kitap, 2022.
- Ibn 'Arabî, Muḥyiddīn. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Edited by 'Abd al-'Aziz Sultan al-Mansub. Yemen: Ministry of Culture, 2010.
- . *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Edited by 'Abd al-'Aziz Sultan al-Mansub. Cairo: Al-Majlis al-a'lā li'l-thaqāfa, 2013.
- . *The Alchemy of Human Happiness (fī ma'rifat kīmiyā' al-sa'āda)*. Translated by Stephen Hirtenstein. Chicago: Anqa Publishing, 2019.
- İbn Miskeveyh. *Mutluluk ve Felsefe*. Edited by Hümeýra Özturan. İstanbul: Klasik, 2017.

Imam Birgivi. *The Path of Muhammad: A Book on Islamic Morals and Ethics by Imam Birgivi*. Translated by Shaykh Bayrak. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005.

al-Jabri, Mohammed Abed. *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

Marcotte, Roxanne D. "The Order of Happiness". In *Monotheism and Ethics: Historical and Contemporary Intersections Among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, edited by Yitshak Tsevi Langerman. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

Mattila, Janne. *The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

Mohamed, Yasien. *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University (IIUM), 2006.

Nusseibeh, Sari. *Avicenna's Al-Shifā'*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Radez, John Peter. *Ibn Miskawayh, the Soul, and the Pursuit of Happiness*. London: Lexington Books, 2019.

Saemi, Amir. *Morality and Revelation in Islamic Thought and Beyond: A New Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Shihadeh, Ayman. *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

al-Shīrāzī, Ṣadr al-Dīn (Mullā Ṣadrā). *Al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fī-l-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a*. Beirut: Dār al-ihyā al-turāth al-'Arabī, 1990.

Stephens, William O. *Stoic Ethics: Epictetus and Happiness as Freedom (Continuum Studies in Ancient Philosophy)*. London: Continuum, 2007.

Ṭūsī, Naṣīr ad-Dīn. *The Nasirean Ethics*. Translated by G. M. Wickens. London: George Allen&Unwin Ltd., 1964.