THE ECONOMIC IDEAS OF KHAJEH NASIR ED-DIN TUSI AS STATED IN THE NASIRIAN ETHICS

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The Akhlaq-i-Nāsiri or Nasirian Ethics is mainly concerned with the problems of practical philosophy and ethics and was written by the famous mediaeval philosopher Khajeh Nasir-id-Din Tūsi at the request of the Ismaili ruler of Qahestān, Nasir ed-Din Abdul Rahim Mansur in about 1235 A.D.[1]. Since then it has been used extensively as a source by the learned men of Persia and indeed the whole of Islam. The book itself has been derived from three main sources: Ibn Miskawaih's Kitāb al-Tihārā; Avicenna's Tadābir al Manāzil; and Fārābi's Madinah Fadilāh. It is divided into three discourses: On Ethics, On Economics, and on Politics.

In the Preamble Tusi makes the following remarks about his work:

> "Since our concern in this book is with one of the parts of the philosophy, it is essential to first give an exposition of the meaning of the term and its division into its components, so to make clear the sense to which our enquiry is limited. Thus, we say that the term'philosophy', as commonly used by

> the learned, signifies knowing things as they are and fulfilling functions as one should.."[2].

Because philosophy, on this definition, is concerned with the material life of human beings, industry and all that is related to making a living, many problems of political economy are debated in the Nasirian ethics even though the ideas involved are often expressed in the form of ethical instructions. In the First Discourse, On Ethics, the whole range of practical philosophy is taken up; while in the Second, apart from a discussion of the intricacies of pedagogy and the qualities of a virtuous wife, the issues of what we might call home economics or management are debated; and the Third Discourse, entitled Politics, relates to the social questions of the day. It is not, therefore, surprising that in such a compendium we should encounter much of the subject matter of contemporary economics both macro and micro. Despite this, Khajeh, with a sense of humility typical of such a learned man says:

> "If the reader ecounters an ambiguity on a point, or regards any question as open to objection, he should recognize that the author of the book has no responsibility for rejoinder, and offers no surety for uncovering the face of accuracy. It becomes all to ask for the favour of guidance from the divine majesty, who is the spring of mercy's abundance and the source of the light of direction."[3]

The basis for Tusi's discussion of material problems is his belief that man holds a superior position in the world of living things:

> "Thus in the matter of externals, in accordance with a pru-

> dent purpose nature has provided that which is needed by other animals such as nourishment to replace what is dissolved, and hair or wool to hinder the harmful effect of cold or heat and instruments of defence by which to ward off the repugnant or the hostile. But while she has caused them to be relieved of their necessities, what man needs in this way has been entrusted to his management, his reason, his control and his will, so that he may contrive as best he knows: his nourishment is not procured without the organization of sowing, reaping, milling, kneading, baking and combining; his clothing is obtained only by the application of spinning, weaving, sewing and dyeing; nor do his weapons come into being without art and polishing and measuring."[4]

From here, we can move on to a consideration of the part played practical activity and human effort in Tusi's ethical system. In the Seventh Section of the First Discourse entitled On Good and Felicity, or What is Intended by Arriving at Perfection the role of thought in the advancement of 'crafts' is discussed as well as the stages entailed in the creation of things meant to improve the conditions of existence. Every act, he says, has an end and a purpose the purpose being man's happiness which in turn is dependent upon the search for perfection.[5] If the seeker moves closer to his goal he experiences joy and exultation which encourages him to continue his journey. As an example of this process, and the part played by the human mind in it, Tusi cites the case of a carpenter who:

> "....So long as he does not first conceive the use of a couch, will employ no thought on how to cons-

> truct it; and so long as he fails to bring the mode of completion wholly within his fantasy will not begin to work upon it; finally, so long as the work is not completed, the use of the couch (which was the original thought) is not realised."[6]

He then adds that it is axiomatic that Man's efforts should be directed towards a definite purpose, that useless effort in an irrational direction is illogical and that men should always attempt to adopt those means which offer them the best results. The 'best means', moreover, are those which bring maximum yield in return for the least possible effort. Thus he says:

> "The statement that absolute good is one idea in which all individuals are associated is based upon the following reasoning. Every motion is in order to reach a requirement, and similarly every action is in order to attain a purpose; but the intelligence does not allow that one should make motions and efforts to infinity in order to grasp a desired end or purpose; for in any act the agent must possess something conceivable otherwise an absurdity befalls distasteful to the intelligence."[7]

The aim of human action should be rational and the means 'profitable for good'. In other words, wealth is not an end in itself but must contribute to the well-being and prosperity of the community. Those who are successful in the acquistion of wordly goods should therefore use their money and resources in the interests of all and invest it in activities which will bring about further improvements

in life.[8]

Indeed Tusi goes still further in rejecting the precedence of material ends and, in his various discussions of the professions man may adopt, he consistently states his belief in the superiority of the pursuit of science and wisdom. Basically he is of the opinion that the attainment of perfection is possible in two ways:

First through nature, which itself moves all living things towards the state of perfection and, second, through discipline and the practice of 'crafts'. The latter proceeds from the human will and desire by enlisting the assistance and participation of natural things and must be of a kind which will enable man to reach nature's perfection.

Thus industry and crafts (to limit the problem to its economic aspect) are subject to man's will and powers of reasoning but they must develop in such a way as to enable man to attain nature's perfection and then to supersede nature. Again, an example is offered to clarify the point:

> "..When men place the eggs of a bird in a heat corresponding to the heat of the latter's breast, the same perfection is to be expected in accordance with nature, namely the bringing forth of young birds is brought about by this regulation; but another virtue is adjoined therefore, i.e. the emergence of many birds at the same time, such that it would seem impossible that the like there of should come into being by way of (normal) incubation.[9]

But in order to develop industry to the state of perfection envisaged by Tusi man has to pay special attention to two important problems: The first is the evaluation of people's abilities since the inherent capabilities of some for a particular craft or industry are greater than those

of others. The second is the means of developing these abilities and applying them to the practice of the craft in question. Khajeh believed that despite the existence of greater talent in some men skill in the pursuit of a particular craft can only come through persistent application to the task. No-one, that is, is born a writer or a carpenter and the attainment of these skills is dependent upon the exercise of discipline. Once a person has moulded, through the exercise of discipline, his inherent abilities to the practice of a particular craft 'the title of wisdom and the mark of virtue are his', and he attains 'civic felicity' and membership of civilization.[10]

Turning to the problem of the geometrical growth of population, we find Khajeh to be of that school of thought which believes population increase to be harmful to mankind. It would, he says, result in a situation in which people are unable to find room to live upon the earth and in which famine and hunger cause suffering and death. He does not, however, pretend to be the originator of this idea which he clearly attributes to Abu Ali Miskawaih whom he quotes at length:

> "Moreover, if our ancestors and forefathers had not passed away, our turn to exist would not have come; for if permanence were possible, it would also be possible for our predecessors, and if all men who have ever been, were to endure (allowing too for the fact of generation and propagation), they would not find room on earth. Master Abu Ali (God have mercy upon him) has given a very lucid passage on the explanation of this idea. He says: Let us suppose that an illustrious man of former times, whose off spring and descendents are well known and clearly designated (e.g. the Prince of Believers, Ali, God ennoble his

countenance) were still to be living together with all his race and lineage, both from within his own lifetime and after his death over the space of the last 400 years. Assuredly their number would exceed 10,000,000; for their residue at the present time, as scattered through the lands of the inhabited quarter (of the earth), and bearning in mind the monstrous slaughter and the various forms of extermination that have overtaken the members of the family, numbers close on 200,000 persons. Consider, then, what their numbers would be if one were to take into account, together with this total, all the members of the past generations and the infants who died in their mother's wombs. Moreover, for every person who lived in Ali's time the same quantity must be added to the original over the space of the last 400 years if one is to realize the extent to which the number of persons would grow, on the assumption that death is taken away from among men during the same 400 year period, while propogation and generation remain in force. Again, if this 400 year period be multiplied, the multiplications of people, as with those on the squares of a chess board, pass beyond the boundary of record and the area of computation. If the surface of the inhabited quarter (which has been measured and assessed

by surveyors) were shared out among such a company, the portion of each would not be sufficient for him to step upon it and stand upright. Thus, even if all this mass of people attempted to stand straight, with their arms held aloft, in the closest proximity to each other, there would not be room for them on the face of the earth-much less when it is a question of lying or sitting down, or moving about and going their different ways. No place would remain free for building or cultivation or the disposal of waste-matter. Such as situation, moreover, would come about in only a short period: how then, if with the prolongation of time and by numberless multiplications in the same reference, they were reduced to sitting on one another's heads.

From the foregoing it is evident that to wish for enduring life in the world, to have a loathing of death and demise, and to conceive that hope can have any relation to such longing: these things belong to the fancies of the ignorant and the absurd notions of the simple minded. Intelligent men however, and sagacious persons hold their minds and hearts free of such thoughts, recognizing that no man can conceivably win any addition to that which is required by Perfect Wisdom and Divine Encompassing Justice:

> and that Man's existence in this (present) predicament and situation is one beyond which no end can be conceived.
>
> Thus, it is apparent that death is not mean, as the common run of people suppose: on the contrary, what is mean is the fear which is a necessary consequence of ignorance."[11]

This quotation acquiants us with the ideas of two of Iran's mediaeval philosophers on the problem of population and the issue of death. They are ideas that have been the subject of much debate and discussion among later Iranian sages.

We have seen that Khajeh Nasir ed Din Tusi believed in the necessity of thought and the search for better practical means (crafts) in order to improve man's conditions of existence. In the Second Discourse of his work, On Economics, he develops this idea by adding that in order to meet his needs man requires the assistance of others. In this way he raises the problem of the importance of co-operation in the conduct of social and economic affairs. In this respect the difference between man and the animals is that once the latter have satisfied their immediate needs for food and shelter they refrain from further motion. However, because of the multiplicity of complex techniques involved in providing man's requirements it is impossible to satisfy each need as it arises. Indeed the production of each item of food or clothing frequently involves many days work. As a result the production and storage of goods cannot be effected by one person alone and man has to seek the help of his fellows. For example, in order to bake bread, wheat is necessary and this has to be stored. The store has to be located in such a way that the wheat will not rot and will be protected from the hands of predators. For this reason man must build houses. But to build shelter is either impossible or extremely difficult for persons who must spend most of their time on the cultivation of the land. Moreover, once the house is built there is a need for someone to remain in it

and to act as its safekeeper. It is at this point that the question of co-operation arises.[12]

The matter is summarised in the First Section of the Third Discourse where Tusi says that we must regard as axiomatic the fact that each individual has need of food, clothing, shelter and weapons. Were he compelled to build for himself the tools of the carpenter or the iron-smith; sow, reap, grind, knead spin and weave, clearly the time at his disposal would not allow him to do justice to any one of these crafts.[13] But if men come to each other's aid, each performing one of these tasks and satisfying the needs of all by fair and equal exchange then the difficulty disappears. Order is established in the world and if exchange is based upon the principles of justice, then co-operation acquires a firm foundation.

Exchange between men who practise different crafts depends on the use of money which is a medium guaranteeing equality. Thus in the seventh section of the First Discourse Khajeh discusses the role of money as a 'just mediator between men' and an 'equalizer of diversities'.[14] But first those things exchanged, between men such as goods and services are divided into three categories:

(1) That which pertains to the division and possession of favours;
(2) That which pertains to the division of transactions and exchanges;
(3) That which pertains to the division of things into which enters compulsion.[15]

Then the nature of these three categories is explained in greater detail and an example of a just transaction is cited:

> "....We say that the relation of this cloth to this gold is as that of this gold to this bench, so that in the exchange of the gold and the bench there is no inequity."[16]

An example is also given of what is meant by a service and Khajeh then concludes that money, which in his opinion must be of gold and which he calls 'dinar' as opposed to 'derham' is a necessity. He considers money to be one of the three principles of justice and a criterion against which the value of all goods and services can be calculated. He says that once this kind of pricing has taken place, then transactions and partnerships of many kinds become possible.

The question of why Khajeh Nasir ed Din Tusi chose gold as the most suitable metal for coinage now arises. Perhaps it would be well to consider first the reasons cited in modern texts of Economics for man's choice of either gold or silver as a medium of exchange since time immemorial. In this way we can see just how close Khajeh's reasoning was to that of the modern economist.

1) Both these metals can be easily broken up into small pieces without reducing their value which is always in proportion to their weight.

2) Both can be laminated into very thin plates.

3) The small pieces can be exchanged for larger ones of equal value.

4) Both metals are rare and this increases their value.

5) Since even small quantities of either are worth a considerable amount costs of transportation are low.

6) Neither metal is subject to decay or erosion.

7) They have uniform natural characteristics and are easily recognisable.

8) Both metals are used for industrial purposes and for decoration.

9) The quantitity produced each year, especially in the case of gold, is more or less stable.

Now we may quote what Tusi had to say on the same subject in the second section of the second discourse:

> "Next, because of the necessity for transactions and the aspects of giving and taking, there was (as we have said in the previous Discourse) a need for money, which is the preserver of justice, the universal adjuster and the lesser law. In virtue of its existence, and by equating a little of its kind with a great amount of other things, one is able to accomplish the labour ot transporting provisions from dwellings to more remote dewllings; this, in as much as the transportation of a little of it (being the value of a quantity of provisions) serves for that of a quantity of provisions,and it is therefore possible to dispense with the inconvenience and trouble of carrying the latter. Likewise, in view of the solidity of its substance, the firmness of its constitution, and the perfection of its composition (which called for permanece), it was possible to conceive of the stability and fixity of acquired gains; for if it were to change or disappear, this would necessarily nullify the trouble taken to gain supplies and to gather acquisitions. Moreover with its acceptance by the various peoples, its full usefulness was organized for all. By such minutiae the providence of the

> perfection dependent on nature in the affairs of daily life brought Divine Grace and Godly Favour from the boundary of potency to the region of act; at the same time, that which was dependent on discipline(such as other technical matters) was entrusted to the insight and regulation of the human species."[17]

Khajeh's purpose in discussing these economic problem is that men might, from the material point of view, live lives of comfort. Indeed he says quite clearly that'...men have no finer ornament than an ample subsistence'[18]and that the means of attaining this condition is industy which is based on justice and close to compassion and virtue.The aim of industry is the increase of wealth which, from the human point of view may be considered in three ways: from the point if view of income, from the point of view of custody and from the point of view of expenditure.[19] Individuals may earn wealth in one of two ways: either through competence and wisdom i.e. by means of industry and commerce ; or through inheritence and gifts.[20] However commerce should be condu ted in such a way that tyranny, disgrace and meaness are avoided, Tyranny includes cheating,discrepancy in weights and measures, deceit or theft. Disgrace is incurred when a person stoops to buffoonery to make his living and meaness is gain through the practice of a base craft.[21]

The ancient philosophers divided crafts into three types: the noble, the intermediate and the mean. Noble crafts are those arising from the soul rather than the body and include firstly those which are dependent upon the substance of wisdom such as good policy, advice and management; secondly, those which depend upon cultivation and learning such as writing rhetoric and medicine; thirdly those which depend on strength and courage such as military skill.[22]

It will be noticed here that Khajeh has assimilated services to industry and that he considers the former to be a pro-

ducer of wealth as well as the latter.

Mean crafts are those which are not in the best interests of the community or which involve the debasement of men engaged in them. Thus with craft or the practice of monopoly does harm to all men; bufoonery and the playing of musical instruments are repugnant to the virtues and tanning and street cleaning involve a natural feeling of revulsion.

The intermediate crafts comprise the whole range of other trades some of which can be classified as necessary (for example agriculture and others unecessary for example agriculture and others unecessary (for example dyeing).

Khajeh advises all the masters of the different trades that they should attempt to perfect their technique and skill and should not be satisfied with inferior work

With respect to the custody of wealth, Khajeh is of the opinion that while expenditure is of course imperative for the sustenance of life nevertheless men should at the same time attempt to replenish that which is consumed, and to save a proportion of their assets either for the purpose of future investment or as a means of protection against hard times. He also gives very specific advice on the means of increasing wealth saying that man should pursue a brisk business and constant, if small profit rather than large but sudden and irregular gains. Moreover he should spread his capital among a number of different activities, agricultural, industrial and commercial, so that should one fail to give a satisfactory yield the others can provide him with an adequate income.[23]

However his advice in this respect is not given without a statement on the limitations which must be put upon acquisitive activity. In particular he is emphatic that the pursuit of wealth should in no case damage the pursuit of virtue. Indeed in his Section 'Concerning the Chastisement and Regulation of Children' he writes 'Let gold and silver be presented to him [the child] in a contemptible light; for the calamity arising from these is greater than that from the venoms of serpents.'[24]

Later, in the same section the problem of cultivating a child's abilities is discussed in the following way:

All children do not have the same degree of aptitude for all types of craft so, as a result, it is necessary to search out the particular abilities of each individual and devote attention to their cultivation. If this is not done and a child is pushed into a field of work for which he is not suited then his days will be wasted and his life will be useless.[25] Similarly Khajeh believed in specialization and warned against moving from the pursuit of one thing to another since this would also involve wasted time and energy. The practice of a particular craft, he thought, should become a matter of habit to the worker who, through constant application to his task, should acquire such skill that his commitment becomes complete and he never makes a mistake.

If we remember the importance Khajeh attributed to thought in the development of industry and then turn, once more, to the question of mean or base crafts we can conclude that it is man's duty of develop new methods of carrying out those industries classified as menial so that all his necessities may event ally be secured in more noble ways. Thus, if the profession of the Mirab (water distributor) is looked upon as is a mean one, then mankind's powers of reasoning should be applied to the search for new techniques. In fact in this particular respect we are, in the contemporary world, witnesses to the power of this philosophy. For today, the problem of water distribution has been solved by science and is now the task of engineers whose profession must be regarded as belonging to the category of the noble.

In conclusion we should remark that there are important differences between the ways in which the Europeans and post-Islamic thinkers have dealt with the problems of economics. The reason for this is that all Iran's philosophers were Moslems and since Islam is a religion which has laid down rules governing the whole range of social and economic relationships, they were obliged to base their views on these. If they arrived at theories contrary to the law of Islam they either had to drop them or

to spend a great deal of time and energy expressing them in a way which would appear compatible with Islamic tenets. Thus many new ideas were either put aside by their originators and never presented for the consideration of others or they were expressed in such a round about way as to render their interpretation extremely difficult. Islamic writers were conscious of this problem as demonstrated by this passage from Jalāl ed-Din Darani's Lawami,."....recent philosophers upon realising the subtelties of the Mohammaden religion and its grasp of all the details of practical philosophy abandoned their search for the benefits of the sayings and the books of the ancient sages."

FOOTNOTES

1. This article is a translation of Nazarieh-hāye Eqtesādi-ye Khajeh Nasir ed Din Tusi first printed in Persian in Tahqiqat-e Eqtesādi Nos. 33 and 34 Spring 1354. The original is based upon the text of the Akhlaq-i Nasiri published by the Javadian Press, Tehran in 1346. The quotations cited here are/taken from Nasir ed Din Tusi, The Nasirian Ethics translated by G.M. Wickens, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London 1964. For the convenience of the English speaking reader the references also relate to pages from this edition.

2. Nasirian Ethics P. 26
3. Op. Cit. P. 31
4. Op. Cit. P. 47
5. Op. Cit. P. 59
6. Op. Cit. P. 59
7. Op. Cit. P. 60
8. Op. Cit. P. 61
9. Op. Cit. P. 109
10. Op. Cit. PP. 111,112
11. Op. Cit. PP. 140-141
12. Op. Cit. P. 153
13. Op. Cit. P. 189
14. Op. Cit. P. 98
15. Op. Cit. P. 96
16. Op. Cit. P. 96
17. Op. Cit. P. 157
18. Op. Cit. P. 159
19. Op. Cit. P. 157
20. Op. Cit. P. 158
21. Op. Cit. P. 158
22. Op. Cit. P. 158
23. Op. Cit. P. 159
24. Op. Cit. P. 170
25. Op. Cit. P. 171