

A Comparative Study of Martha Nussbaum's and Marxist Views on Happiness and Its Contemporary Implications for a Happy Life

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Abstract: "A happy life" is an important ethical issue in Martha Nussbaum's research. Nussbaum believes that a happy life is achieved by realizing potential virtues through actions and by flourishing one's humanity through political life in the polis and entering into a friendship with another person. Marx's view of happiness holds that under the capitalist private ownership system, starting from the relationship between capitalists and workers, labor is the source of human happiness, and true human happiness needs to be realized through labor. What is happiness? This moral question has always been the focus of discussion among ethicists. The discussions of philosophers throughout history and around the world on virtue and happiness have accumulated profound thoughts on the issue of happiness. Marx, starting from the dialectical natural relations between people, individuals and society, and society and nature, pointed out that free labor by humans and their free and all-round development in transforming the objective world is happiness. In today's rapidly changing world, as Marx said, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned." People generally feel that vulnerability is closely linked to life, leading to pessimism and nihilism. Against this backdrop, the thoughts of Marx and Nussbaum on "happiness" undoubtedly have a clarifying effect and offer significant inspiration and encouragement to a society filled with pessimism and nihilism.

Keywords: A happy life; The concept of happiness; The convergence

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1. The Concept of Happiness: Differences between Nussbaum's and Marxist Views on Happiness

(1) Good life: the concentrated expression of the "Happiness View"

A good human life is not only an activity that realizes virtues but also includes "those activities related to citizenship and political affiliation, as well as those involving love and friendship." [Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Translated by Wang Yanli. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2009.] That is, political activities and friendship. These two activities, which Nussbaum calls "relational goods," not only have instrumental value for a good human life but also have intrinsic value. First, political activities, the activities of citizens, and a nourishing political environment are necessary tools for developing and maintaining good character. Friendship, with its deep emotional factors, provides the motivation and source for creating a good political environment. It is precisely for this reason that Aristotle gave "justice" and "friendship" high status in the "Nicomachean Ethics." In the political activities of a polis, justice is the most authoritative of all virtues, equivalent to "perfect virtue" itself, and it is a hard condition for a polis to function well; while friendship, due to its emotional nature, becomes a soft condition for the good operation of a polis. Without "justice," polis life would only have cold institutional arrangements and the construction of good order, lacking a driving mechanism; or without "friendship," lacking institutional arrangements and good order, it would be difficult to form a good community. Therefore, both are indispensable. And to say that political life and friendship have intrinsic value, Nussbaum quotes Aristotle's view that humans are by nature political animals, having parents, children, spouses, friends, and fellow citizens. That is to say, humans are relational

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beings and cannot live alone. "A solitary life is not only imperfect but also lacks something very fundamental, to the extent that it is difficult for us to call it a human life." [Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Translated by Xu Xiangdong and Lu Meng. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2007.] This "very fundamental thing" is that humans must live among people; otherwise, we cannot be ourselves. Based on this fundamental position, political activities and friendship must be chosen "for their own sake" rather than merely from a tool perspective. Just as the realization of virtuous activities is subject to the influence of luck, so too are political activities and friendship, which are relational goods. Moreover, the realization of virtue is the state of virtue plus activity, but political activities, especially friendship, are not merely a state of love plus a suitable situation to trigger it. They also depend on the existence of others. In other words, the communication and response of others to you are of essential importance in the realization of "relational goods". Without these, there would be no such thing as political activities or friendship.

Is morality the entire content of happiness? Materialists have given a negative answer. Starting from the same logical point of "human beings", the Marxist view of happiness is an ethical concept based on materialist historical views and does not define the essence of happiness by morality. The Marxist view of happiness is a revolution against the moral happiness theory in the traditional Western ethical thought for a thousand years. It objectively and thoroughly solves the problems of the formation and acquisition of happiness. The Marxist view of happiness is based on historical materialism and formed on the basis of criticizing the bourgeois moral view. What it advocates is practical happiness. The morality of human society has always been consistent with the development of social production. Morality has always been the morality of a class. [Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 3, Beijing: People's University of China Press, 2008, p. 580] Therefore, the morality of class society cannot constitute the entire content of human happiness. As Engels pointed out: "All previous moral theories are ultimately the products of the economic conditions of their time. And society has moved in class oppositions until now, so morality has always been the morality of a class." In class society, the universal unhappiness of people stems from the direct class opposition and interest disputes between people caused by the production mode, that is, the private ownership of the means of production. Thus, pure morality cannot cover up the objective interest conflicts under the private ownership of the means of production. In other words, in class society, morality is not the entire content of happiness. The complete coincidence and identity of happiness and morality can only be achieved on the premise of thoroughly eliminating class opposition and interest disputes. Under such circumstances, both happiness and morality confirm the free and all-round development of human beings. Only by thoroughly eliminating private ownership can people obtain true happiness.

(2) The realization of the concept of happiness: people's good life

In the face of the pursuit of happiness, can human beings only wait passively? Or can they do something? Regarding this question, Nussbaum answers it from two levels. The first is the ontological level. Vulnerability is like human destiny. As long as one leads a human life, one is bound to be connected with vulnerability. But as she puts it, "It is precisely because of vulnerability that human beings have strength, beauty, excellence and nobility." In other words, it is because human life is connected with vulnerability that we need to fight against it through our voluntary actions. In this process, virtues are manifested, human nature grows, and life flourishes. If people live in a safe environment without shortage, risk, need or limitation, such a god-like life will naturally be free from vulnerability. However, "in such a life, most core human values lose their value and even become incomprehensible." Moreover, such a life is extremely boring. Therefore, in "The Odyssey", when Calypso, who was in love with Odysseus, offered him an eternal life without sorrow, danger or death, Odysseus refused without hesitation and chose a human life, which was adventurous, difficult and certain to end in death. But the life he chose also contained the possibility of excellence, richness and the possibility of writing one's own history. If Odysseus had chosen to stay with Calypso, his story would have ended with "and they lived happily ever after." The second level is the operational level. Nussbaum answers that although "vulnerability is a necessary background condition for some true human goods", and its connection with a good human life is so close, some vulnerabilities can be avoided. Nussbaum points out:

"If we think about the vulnerable elements in human life properly, we will see that many human vulnerabilities do not come from the structure of human life itself, nor from some mysterious natural necessity, but from ignorance, greed, malice and various other forms of madness." [Martha Nussbaum. *Fragility of Goodness* [M]. Translated by Xu Xiangdong and Lu Meng. Nanjing: Yilin Press. 2007]

As a new philosophy distinct from the old ones, Marxist philosophy is based on historical materialism. The Marxist theory of human nature does not start from an abstract "human", but from "the real, active human being". This is an important distinction between Marxist theory of human nature and humanistic theory of human nature. In "Speech at the Grave of Marx", Engels clearly pointed out: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history, namely, a simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology: that the production of material life and of the means of that production is the basis of all history; that the changes in the economic relations of men are the cause of the changes in their political and intellectual relations; and that in examining such changes, we have to examine the material life of men and that which determines it." Therefore, the basis for the acquisition and inheritance of human happiness must be "the production of material life and the means of that production", that is, labor. Labor first distinguishes humans from animals. It is labor that creates the material basis for human pursuit of happiness and provides rich material resources for humans; it is labor that rescues people from the illusion of false happiness. Without labor, there would be no human society, and only labor can make happiness last. The fruits of human labor not only bring happiness to themselves but also provide a solid material foundation for the happy life of future generations. Labor is not only a means to obtain happiness but also the source of it. If labor were to cease, "there would only be poverty, the universalization of extreme poverty, and in the situation of extreme poverty, the struggle for necessities would have to be resumed, and all the old, stale and filthy things would rise again." "Material forces can only be destroyed by material forces." Labor is the source of creating happiness.

(3) The aim of a good life: The free and all-round development of human beings

Nussbaum advocated a flourishing good life. In her view, a flourishing good life is achieved by realizing potential virtues through actions, and by flourishing one's humanity through political life in the polis and entering into a loving relationship with another person. However, this good life is linked to "vulnerability", because both the realization of virtues and political life and love are closely associated with "luck". "Luck", an important concept in Nussbaum's thought, simply refers to "events beyond the control of human agents". [Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* [M]. Translated by Xu Xiangdong and Lu Meng. Nanjing: Yilin Press. 2007] It includes both the various accidental circumstances bestowed upon us by the external world and the irrational parts of our souls, such as desires, feelings, and passions, which are uncontrollable factors. In Nussbaum's view, as long as we are leading a human life, luck will accompany us like air. This is because human beings are finite beings, and their finiteness determines their insufficiency. They must enrich themselves through various activities and rely on others to flourish, just like the growth of a grapevine, which requires the nourishment of sunlight and rain. This dependence on external activities and others determines that human life is always accompanied by luck. First, a good human life is an activity of realizing virtues, rather than a noble state of character. The ancient Stoics believed that as long as a person was in a state of having virtues, he could lead a good life. In modern times, this idea was most prominently reflected in Kant's ethics. Kant always emphasized the autonomy of moral value derived from good will against external forces, that is, truly morally valuable things are immune to external influences. In other words, whether a person is moral and can lead a good life does not depend on whether the morality is realized, but on whether there is such a noble state of character. Moral value is immune to luck. It can be said that this has been a very popular tradition in moral philosophy from ancient times to modern times. Nussbaum clearly opposes this view. She quotes Aristotle's thought and points out: "For a person, a good life not only requires a good state of character, but also requires actual activity." [Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* [M]. Translated by Xu Xiangdong and Lu Meng. Nanjing: Yilin Press. 2007] Because a good state of character only provides a possibility for a good life, it can

only be truly called a good life when it is realized through activities. If the character remains in an un-realized state, it is a cut-off of a good life. Only when the character state is realized through activities can life become flourishing.

The materialist conception of history of Marxism inherits and transcends the humanistic philosophy of Feuerbach. The human being in the materialist conception of history of Marxism is a concrete, real, historical, and socialized human being, which to a certain extent is consistent with the "human" in traditional Chinese ethical thought. The Marxist view of happiness is based on materialism and uses a scientific spirit to criticize the "humanistic" spirit of old philosophy, which is an important distinction from all old philosophies. Marx's ideal of life was initially "for the happiness of humanity and our own perfection", thus taking "humanity" as the subject of his view of happiness. Marx's view of the happiness of "real human beings" combined with materialism fundamentally broke away from Feuerbach's simplistic view of "abstract human beings" and "love's happiness". Marx criticized: "Feuerbach never saw the real existing, active human being, but remained at the abstract level of regarding human sensuous activity as practice." From this, it can be seen that Marx's concept of the "real person's" happiness is inseparable from historical materialism. Based on historical materialism, Marx pointed out the path to the happiness of the "real person"; that is, in specific historical practice and class struggle, the real person constantly engages in material and spiritual production to meet their original need for survival and development. Then, through historical interaction, they produce not only their own needs but also the needs of others, creating social collective happiness from individual happiness. In material practice and class struggle, through production and reproduction of this individual and social happiness, the ultimate goal of each person's free and all-round development of happiness is achieved. In summary, whether it is the concept of happiness in traditional Chinese ethical thought or the Marxist concept of happiness, their real subjects are all real, historical, specific, and socialized people. Although they emerged in different times and spaces, they both developed their respective concepts of happiness in response to the original need for human survival and development. It is precisely for this reason that they can jointly construct the theoretical foundation and cultural background of "a better life" in the current context of our country.

2. The Convergence of Two Views on Happiness: Commonalities between Martha Nussbaum's and Marxist Views on Happiness

(1) The subject of the concept of happiness: responding to rational demands

Nasbaum's elaboration on luck and her proposal of leading a thriving good life through "relational goodness" are all rooted in the resistance against the hegemony of rationalism. Rationalism itself is not inherently wrong, and rational life is undoubtedly an important dimension in human life. Nasbaum has discussed the importance of rationality in many occasions, and the cultivation of rational self-reflection is the goal that her educational philosophy has always focused on. The key issue is that if one regards such a dimension as the entirety and the ultimate goal of human pursuit, and regards other dimensions as the appendages of rationality that can be discarded when needed, such a one-sided development undoubtedly poses great risks. Especially when this rationality becomes more extreme and turns into instrumental rationality and calculative rationality, the consequences will be even more unimaginable. Acute thinkers have long realized this and have already carried out or are currently conducting effective critiques. Nasbaum, although not specifically criticizing rationalism, can also be understood to imply this meaning through her related discussions on a good life and vulnerability. In fact, as a flesh-and-blood human being with emotions, an individual is a multi-dimensional and multi-possibility entity. If life only has the dimensions of rationality and stasis, it will block other possibilities of human development, and human life will become dry, monotonous, and boring. Greek mythology has Apollo, the representative of rationality, and Dionysus, the representative of sensibility. Greek philosophy also has Democritus, who advocated stasis, and Heraclitus, who advocated flux. This shows that since the beginning of human existence, people have been swinging between certainty and uncertainty. Certainty makes people's lives stable and gives them a sense of home, while

uncertainty makes people's lives full of possibilities and gives rise to hope and fear. People struggle and grow in this tension, and only then can they possibly lead a thriving good life and write their own history. In conclusion, whether it is Arendt or Nussbaum, their theories have many areas for dialogue. However, due to the different historical backgrounds of the two, their political conceptions of "a good life" are also different. The realization of communism is the lofty ideal goal of Marxism. In a communist society, people achieve free and comprehensive development and maximize personal happiness. Marx described it as follows: "In the advanced stage of communist society, when the situation where people are forced to obey the division of labor as if it were a servitude has disappeared, and thus the opposition between mental and physical labor has also disappeared; when labor is no longer merely a means of livelihood but itself becomes the first need of life; when the collective wealth of all sources is fully flowing, only then can society completely go beyond the narrow horizons of bourgeois legal rights and write on its own banner: each according to their ability, to each according to their needs." Communist society has the following characteristics. First, public ownership of the means of production, which is the essence of the communist society pursued by Marx and Engels. Second, each according to their ability, according to needs. Third, people break free from the shackles of all old forces, labor becomes a means for personal needs rather than a burden, and becomes a means for living. The vision of the Great Harmony Society and the communist society are thousands of years apart, and their theoretical foundations and essences are different. However, as ideal goals for a happy society, their connotations and intentions are similar. First, the realization goals of the two are similar. People in the Great Harmony Society "do not need to hoard goods for themselves", politics selects virtuous and capable people, society is communal, and there is no exploitation. Marx and Engels focused on the fundamental contradictions of capitalist society to solve problems and construct an ideal happy society. That is, public ownership, where the society is owned by the people. Secondly, the distribution method is similar, namely, distribution according to needs. The long-standing simple materialism, simple dialectics, humanitarianism and the ideal of communism in Chinese culture are all rich nutrients that nourish Marxism to take root and sprout in China.

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