Social Development Studies, 2026, Volume 2, Issue 3
https://www.bbwpublisher.com/journal/SDS
Online ISSN: 3083-3868
Print ISSN: 3083-3876

The Contemporary Connotations and Pathways to Realizing the Concept of Happiness from the Perspective of Philosophical Speculation

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the history of philosophical speculation from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century, elucidating the four-fold connotations of the contemporary concept of happiness: grounded in creative labor, rooted in social relations, balancing material and spiritual aspects, and integrating the individual and society. It proposes four pathways to realization: advancing people's livelihoods, promoting fairness and justice, improving the ecological environment, and strengthening grassroots governance, with the hope of providing some reference for relevant researchers.

Keywords: Philosophical reflection; Concept of happiness; Pathways to realization

Online publication: June 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Throughout the millennia of human philosophical history, the question "What is happiness?" has been a constant theme. While philosophers across different eras have put forward diverse perspectives, the depth of their insights has continually deepened with the passage of time, reflecting, to a certain extent, the ongoing evolution of humanity's understanding of the meaning of existence. In the contemporary era, conceptions of happiness take diverse forms; however, at the national level, a consensus on the people's happiness must be formed before policies and strategies to enhance their sense of well-being can be established. Therefore, analyzing the contemporary connotations and pathways to realizing the concept of happiness from the perspective of philosophical reflection, grounded in socialism with Chinese characteristics, holds significant research value.

2. The evolution of the concept of happiness from a philosophical perspective

As early as ancient Greece, philosophers had already begun to explore the question of happiness. Among them, Socrates linked happiness to the soul, proposing that one must examine one's own life and follow virtuous knowledge to attain happiness; he believed that reason should govern passions and desires, and that true happiness lies in the harmony and order of the soul's various parts. Aristotle further pointed out that happiness is the virtuous realization of the soul's potential, which must be attained through the application of wisdom and virtue in concrete actions [1]. The Epicurean school held a different view, arguing that happiness manifests as a body free from pain and a soul free from disturbance; inner peace is attained only by withdrawing from the clamor of public life; the Stoics, on the other hand, believed that to achieve happiness, one must conform to the rational order of the universe, restrain personal passions, and accept fate with equanimity.

In the Middle Ages, European studies on the concept of happiness largely unfolded within a theological framework. Among them, Augustine asserted that earthly happiness is fleeting and unreliable, and that the soul's return to God to attain salvation is the true destination of eternal happiness; Thomas Aquinas sought to argue that secular life has its own value, yet complete happiness is ultimately fulfilled through divine grace; Ancient Chinese philosophers also engaged in extensive reflection on "what constitutes happiness." Among them, the sages of Confucianism held that virtue and happiness are inherently the same; Confucius argued that those who practice benevolence (ren) experience peace of mind and freedom from worry, Mencius discussed the three joys of the gentleman, all of which are rooted in the practice of virtue; however, the Daoist philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi held the opposite view, believing that people's pursuit of fame and profit is precisely the root cause of the loss of freedom, and that only by returning to simplicity and following the natural order can one attain the supreme joy of carefree freedom; Later, when Buddhism was introduced to China, it established its doctrine on the Truth of Suffering, asserting that clinging to desire is the root of suffering, and that Nirvana—a state of tranquility—points to the ultimate peace achieved through liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

In modern times, with the rise of the Enlightenment, philosophical conceptions of happiness began to shift toward individual rationality. Among them, Descartes took "I think" as the starting point of cognition and proposed that happiness is linked to one's own capacity for judgment; Spinoza, after analyzing the mechanisms by which emotions bind the mind, pointed out that only by using reason to discern necessity can one's mind attain freedom; some British empiricists also analyzed the nature of happiness from the perspective of actual human experience, with Locke, for instance, arguing that happiness and suffering are the two primary motivators driving human behavior; Hume held that emotions are the foundation of morality and happiness; Rousseau analyzed the essence of happiness from a broader perspective, concluding that to attain happiness, one must return to a natural state characterized by a simple, innate sense of conscience; Kant, in his work, distinguished between virtue and happiness, arguing that virtue is a prerequisite for happiness, while happiness is the sum of human sensibility, desires, and satisfaction [2]. Furthermore, Bentham's utilitarianism holds that happiness is quantifiable and can be summarized as "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."

By the nineteenth century, numerous philosophers continued to conduct in-depth research on the question of "happiness." Among them, Hegel viewed happiness as a process of reconciliation between individual particularity and universal ethics; he argued that if humans wish to achieve subjective freedom,

they must—and can only—seek it within an objective spiritual order. Schopenhauer's philosophical thought posits that the will drives humans; therefore, life is eternal suffering—that is, humans can only attain happiness briefly, spending the vast majority of their time in pain and boredom. On the one hand, this can be understood as people enduring long-term suffering for the sake of fleeting happiness; on the other hand, it can be interpreted as the emergence of happiness being a positive numbing emotion generated to help people endure long-term suffering—happiness merely serves to provide a respite from that suffering. Nietzsche, on the other hand, starting from the existing value system, believed that the foundation of happiness lies in the growth of the human will to power and the eruption of creative passion.

Looking at the evolution of the concept of happiness from the perspective of philosophical speculation, it has undergone multiple transformations: shifting from an external pursuit to inner introspection, from dependence on the divine to human autonomy, and from sensual pleasure to rational clarity. Although the arguments of philosophers across different periods vary, they all point to a common conclusion: happiness is closely tied to the construction of the meaning of life, and a large number of scholars have focused their discussions on the question of "which way of life better perfects human nature."

3. The contemporary implications of the concept of happiness from a philosophical perspective

3.1. Grounded in creative labor

In the contemporary conception of happiness, labor is the fundamental source of happiness. Marxist philosophy holds that labor creates humanity's historical essence, and that in the process of transforming the objective world, individuals also achieve the sublimation of their self-worth. Socialism with Chinese Characteristics has inherited and developed the basic principles of Marxist philosophy, asserting that happiness does not fall from the sky but depends entirely on the diligent toil of one's own hands. Consequently, labor is the sole path for individuals to exercise their talents, contribute to society, and attain dignity. The vast majority of workers demonstrate dedication and excellence in their ordinary posts—from precision manufacturing workshops to vast farmlands, from the forefront of scientific and technological innovation to the grassroots of community service—where every act of honest labor weaves the fabric of a happy life. The state advocates a culture that reveres labor and respects creativity, making diligence in work, integrity in conduct, and prosperity through hard work shared values across society. People find fulfillment through labor and inspiration through creativity—this is not only the fundamental stance of historical materialism but also the foundation of the contemporary concept of happiness.

3.2. Rooted in social relationships

Under the contemporary concept of happiness, isolated individuals cannot attain complete happiness. Chinese socialism with Chinese characteristics sets the people's aspiration for a better life as its goal, precisely because it recognizes that happiness is nurtured within sound social relationships. Although fundamentally, an individual's sense of happiness stems from internal experiences, feedback from the surrounding environment also drives the individual to feel happy—a principle that aligns with the underlying logic of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In a friendly social atmosphere, an individual's contributions are reciprocated; when facing difficulties, they receive assistance from others; when experiencing joy, they can share it with others; and even when feeling lonely, they can communicate with others and find warmth [3]. Therefore,

the contemporary concept of happiness differs fundamentally from individualism in that individuals gain deeper and more enduring fulfillment through integration into the collective and service to others. Building harmonious social relationships, fostering social trust, and deepening a sense of community are the inevitable paths to the universal happiness of the people.

3.3. Balancing material and spiritual well-being

The contemporary concept of happiness advocates for the coordinated development of material and spiritual well-being. Marxism opposes viewing happiness as mere sensory pleasure, nor does it advocate for abstract discussions of spiritual realms divorced from the material foundation. Socialism with Chinese characteristics emphasizes that the level of productive forces determines the extent to which happiness is realized, while simultaneously recognizing that a rich spiritual life is of equal importance. The sustained growth of material wealth lays a solid foundation for the people's happiness—that is, better food, clothing, housing, transportation, health care, and the ecological environment are all prerequisites for achieving happiness. However, once material needs are met, people will further pursue a fulfilling spiritual life. This is the source of the contradiction between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and the unbalanced and inadequate development that has emerged since Socialism with Chinese Characteristics entered a new era. Material abundance and spiritual fulfillment are mutually reinforcing; any one-sided neglect of either will undermine the integrity of happiness. Consequently, the contemporary concept of happiness seeks the dual realization of "with granaries full, one knows propriety; with food and clothing sufficient, one knows honor and shame."

3.4. Integrating the individual and society

The contemporary concept of happiness elucidates the dialectical unity between individual happiness and social happiness. Socialism with Chinese characteristics respects the legitimate right of every member to pursue their own happiness, while also recognizing that the realization of individual happiness is inseparable from social progress. Although an individual's perception of happiness stems from inner experience, the overall level of social development directly defines the limits of what individual happiness can achieve—a perspective that is intrinsically consistent with Marxist theory that the essence of humanity is the totality of social relations. Against the macro backdrop of national prosperity and the revitalization of the nation, the space for individuals to showcase their talents is becoming increasingly expansive, and opportunities to reap rewards are growing ever more abundant. The contemporary concept of happiness thus rejects the narrow perspective of extreme individualism and advocates integrating personal dreams into the national dream, thereby expanding the depth of happiness within the broader framework of the unity of the family and the nation. Public policies focus on upholding fairness and justice, improving the social security network, and creating opportunities for shared development for all people. Individuals gain happiness through the nourishment of society, while society gathers strength through the contributions of individuals; the two complement each other, together constituting the contemporary concept of happiness.

4. Pathways to realizing the concept of happiness from a philosophical perspective

4.1. Promoting people's well-being

To improve the quality of people's lives, we must first address the issues of greatest concern to the public:

employment, education, and healthcare. First, regarding employment, we must improve mechanisms to promote employment for key groups, broaden market-based and socialized employment channels, and refine systems to protect the rights and interests of flexible workers, enabling more people to secure stable incomes and the dignity of labor; Second, regarding education, we must advance compulsory education from basic equity toward high-quality equity, improve the facilities and practical training capabilities of vocational schools, expand access to higher education, and optimize the distribution of academic disciplines and majors; third, regarding healthcare, we must deepen the tiered medical care system, build closely integrated medical consortia, extend high-quality medical resources to the county level, reduce the public's medical expenses, and strengthen the public health protection network [4]. Furthermore, regarding housing, we will accelerate the improvement of a housing system that balances rental and purchase options, increase the effective supply of affordable rental housing, and address the temporary housing difficulties faced by new urban residents and young people; finally, regarding elderly care and childcare, we will vigorously develop community-embedded elderly care facilities, build a coordinated elderly care framework integrating home-based, community-based, and institutional care, expand the coverage of inclusive childcare services, and alleviate the burden of child-rearing and elder care on families.

4.2. Promoting equity and justice

Upholding social equity and justice is a key condition for ensuring that people feel secure and happy. First, regarding the order of income distribution, we will uphold the primary role of distribution according to work, increase the actual share of labor remuneration in primary distribution, and strengthen the regulatory role of taxes, social security, and transfer payments to gradually narrow income gaps between urban and rural areas, among regions, and across industries, so that workers can truly feel that their efforts are matched by their rewards; Second, regarding the guarantee of equal opportunities, we will dismantle institutional barriers such as household registration status, open up channels for social mobility in education, employment, and career advancement, enable individuals to secure opportunities for upward mobility based on their moral character, abilities, and actual achievements, and put an end to all forms of hidden exclusion and intergenerational entrenchment; Third, regarding the upholding of fairness in rules, we will improve the legal framework and the judicial accountability system, safeguard the people's rights to equal participation in economic and social affairs, ensure the open and transparent exercise of public power, and enable the public to develop firm confidence in the rule of law through every law enforcement decision and judicial case; Furthermore, regarding the equalization of basic public services, we will continue to prioritize the allocation of resources—such as those for education, healthcare, and culture—to rural areas and remote mountainous regions, gradually eliminating disparities in the provision of public services between urban and rural areas, so that people in different regions enjoy broadly comparable conditions for development and quality of life.

4.3. Building an ecological civilization

Safeguarding our green mountains and clear waters and preserving a natural environment filled with birdsong and the fragrance of flowers for the people is, in itself, a practical measure to enhance their sense of well-being. First, regarding pollution prevention and control, we will thoroughly implement comprehensive management initiatives for air, water, and soil; strengthen coordinated control of industrial, mobile, and domestic pollution sources; steadily increase the proportion of days with good air quality; and continuously

improve water quality in key river basins, so that the public can breathe fresh air, drink clean water, and eat safe food; Second, regarding ecological protection, we will delineate ecological protection red lines, advance the systematic management of mountains, waters, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, and deserts, as well as key ecosystem restoration projects, elevate the overall level of biodiversity conservation, and fortify the national ecological security barrier; Third, regarding green development, we will promote the optimization and adjustment of industrial and energy structures, develop a circular economy and clean production models, advocate for a simple, moderate, green, and low-carbon lifestyle, and reduce resource consumption and carbon emissions per unit of output, ensuring that our production and lifestyle are better aligned with nature's carrying capacity; Fourth, regarding the improvement of urban and rural living environments, we will coordinate efforts to address shortcomings in sewage and waste treatment facilities, increase the coverage radius of urban parks and green spaces, and build beautiful rural communities that are livable and conducive to business, so that it becomes commonplace for people to see greenery when they open their windows and enter a park when they step outside.

4.4. Improving grassroots governance

The grassroots level is the frontline of social governance and the primary window through which the public perceives the quality of public services. First, regarding the development of grassroots organizations, we will strengthen the leading role of the Party, improve the urban and rural community governance system—which combines self-governance, rule of law, and moral governance under the leadership of Party organizations—and enhance the practical capacity of village and neighborhood committees to serve the public, transforming grassroots organizations into strong bastions for uniting the people, resolving conflicts, and serving the public; Second, regarding the resolution of conflicts and disputes, we will adhere to the principles of prevention first and mediation as a priority, improve the coordinated mechanism linking people's mediation, administrative mediation, and judicial mediation, and promote the rule-of-law-based and standardized operation of the petitioning system. We will strive to nip conflicts in the bud and resolve them at the grassroots level, preventing minor issues from escalating into major ones and major issues from spiraling out of control; Third, regarding public safety, we will weave a dense social security prevention and control network, routinely advance the campaign against organized crime and corruption, strengthen full-chain supervision of food and pharmaceuticals, and improve emergency response capabilities for disaster prevention, mitigation, and relief to safeguard the lives and property of the people; Fourth, regarding public convenience services, we will extend government services to towns, subdistricts, villages, and communities; implement a "one-window" reception and integrated processing service model; and expand the scope and depth of online services, so that the public can minimize trips, access services more easily, and complete their affairs.

5. Conclusion

Looking back at the history of philosophical discourse, philosophers' understanding of happiness has undergone multiple evolutions. China's modern and contemporary concept of happiness, while drawing on historical wisdom, is deeply integrated with the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is grounded in the foundation of labor, nurtured by social relationships, characterized by the coordinated development of material and spiritual well-being, and defined by the mutual fulfillment of the individual and society—together forming the complete framework of the contemporary concept of happiness. Under this

contemporary concept of happiness, local governments across the country should also continue to focus their efforts on four dimensions—improving people's livelihoods, upholding fairness, protecting the ecosystem, and strengthening governance—to enhance the people's sense of happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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