



The Problematic Ideal of Happiness: Marx's Dialectical Negation of Misery

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Abstract

In keeping with the Western philosophical tradition, Marx seeks an ideal of life in which man realizes the qualities that set him apart from all other species. In this article, I emphasize that one of Marx's most significant innovations lies in the idea that a particular inner element in human beings is the most essential basis for what sets their action apart: the ability to change their living conditions and, in the process, consciously and deliberately alter their own nature, that is, realize their freedom.

I believe that Marx's individualistic conception of needs is in line with the fact that from 1845 onward, he does not address the issue of happiness in the free society he anticipates. The radical source of misery is not a lack of satisfaction, but rather the inability, relevant to workers and capitalists alike, to fulfill "free needs." These are not the same as free choices, but express the realization of unique elements of the individual that provide individual and human enjoyment and must not be confused with happiness. Marx's purpose is indeed to overcome misery, but in contrast to many commentators, I claim that this is done not for the sake of happiness, but rather for "real individual activity," which points to the individuation of all senses and needs and also entails positive suffering involved in the free and open process of self-enrichment.

Keywords: happiness; misery; Self-enrichment