
Reorienting The Search for Happiness: Plato, Eudaimonia, and The Limits off Material Fulfillment

Reorientasi Pencarian Kebahagiaan: Plato, Eudaimonia, dan Batas Pemenuhan Material

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ABSTRACT: Happiness remains one of the most widely desired yet persistently misunderstood human aspirations. In modern life, many individuals continue to seek happiness through wealth, possessions, status, and achievement, even though such pursuits often fail to provide enduring fulfillment. This article examines that paradox by placing Plato's concept of eudaimonia in dialogue with contemporary research on well-being, gratitude, mindfulness, and meaningful relationships. Using a qualitative interpretive literature review, the study analyzes Plato's Republic alongside major philosophical and psychological scholarship on flourishing and subjective well-being. The review suggests that the repeated search for happiness is sustained by a misidentification of external goods as ends rather than means, by hedonic adaptation, and by the neglect of inner formation and relational depth. Plato remains valuable because he redirects attention from pleasure and possession toward virtue, psychic order, and the rational orientation of life toward the good. Contemporary psychology deepens this perspective by showing that gratitude, mindfulness, and meaningful social bonds play a central role in sustaining durable well-being. The article argues that true happiness is best understood as a reflective, relational, and ethically guided form of flourishing rather than as the accumulation of pleasurable experiences or material success.

Keyword: Eudaimonia; Gratitude; Happiness; Mindfulness; Plato.

ABSTRAK: Kebahagiaan merupakan salah satu tujuan hidup yang paling diinginkan, namun sekaligus paling sering disalahpahami. Dalam kehidupan modern, banyak individu masih mencari kebahagiaan melalui kekayaan, kepemilikan, status, dan pencapaian, meskipun upaya tersebut sering kali tidak menghasilkan pemenuhan yang bertahan lama. Artikel ini mengkaji paradoks tersebut dengan menempatkan konsep eudaimonia dari Plato dalam dialog dengan penelitian kontemporer mengenai kesejahteraan, rasa syukur, mindfulness, dan relasi yang bermakna. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui tinjauan pustaka interpretatif dengan menganalisis karya Republic karya Plato serta literatur filsafat dan psikologi utama terkait flourishing dan kesejahteraan subjektif. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pencarian kebahagiaan yang berulang dipertahankan oleh kesalahan dalam mengidentifikasi hal-hal eksternal sebagai tujuan akhir, bukan sebagai sarana, oleh fenomena adaptasi hedonik, serta oleh pengabaian terhadap pembentukan batin dan kedalaman relasi. Pemikiran Plato tetap relevan karena mengarahkan kembali perhatian dari kesenangan dan kepemilikan menuju kebajikan, keteraturan jiwa, dan orientasi rasional kehidupan menuju kebaikan. Psikologi kontemporer memperkaya perspektif ini dengan menunjukkan bahwa rasa syukur, mindfulness, dan hubungan sosial yang bermakna berperan penting dalam menopang kesejahteraan yang berkelanjutan. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa kebahagiaan sejati lebih tepat dipahami sebagai bentuk flourishing yang reflektif, relasional, dan berlandaskan etika, bukan sebagai akumulasi pengalaman menyenangkan atau keberhasilan material.

Kata Kunci: Eudaimonia, Rasa syukur, Kebahagiaan, Mindfulness, Plato.

A. INTRODUCTION

Happiness is one of the most enduring concerns in human life. Across cultures and historical periods, people have sought a condition of life that feels complete, worthwhile, and deeply satisfying. Yet despite this universal aspiration, happiness remains conceptually unstable and practically elusive. In everyday discourse, happiness is often associated with positive emotions, comfort, pleasure, success, and the enjoyment of desirable experiences. In contemporary societies, it is also commonly linked to economic achievement, social recognition, lifestyle visibility, and the accumulation of possessions. People are encouraged to believe that happiness will follow once the right income level, status marker, relationship, or achievement has been secured. This view is powerful because it appears intuitive and because modern economic and media cultures repeatedly reinforce it. At the same time, it is also deeply problematic. Many individuals continue to search for happiness even after obtaining the very things that were expected to make them fulfilled.

This tension reveals a central paradox. Happiness is pursued with intensity, but the forms through which it is pursued often fail to satisfy for long. The desired promotion is attained, yet restlessness returns. A major purchase provides excitement, but the excitement fades. Recognition may bring validation, but the feeling proves unstable and dependent on continued external confirmation. This recurring pattern suggests that the problem is not merely that people have too little, but that they often misunderstand what happiness is and where it is to be found. The persistence of the search for happiness therefore demands more than motivational advice or emotional encouragement. It requires conceptual clarification.

Contemporary research on subjective well-being has already demonstrated that external conditions, while important, do not map neatly onto lasting happiness. Individuals often adapt to improved circumstances and return to familiar baselines of satisfaction, a process widely discussed in relation to hedonic adaptation.¹ Material comfort, achievement, and convenience may improve aspects of life, but they do not necessarily resolve the deeper question of what constitutes a flourishing human existence.

¹ Ed Diener et al., "Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress," *Psychological Bulletin* (US) 125, no. 2 (1999): 276–302, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276>; Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener, "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?," *Psychological Bulletin* (US) 131, no. 6 (2005): 803–55, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.803>.

Once basic needs are met, the relationship between wealth and enduring happiness becomes more complex, and factors such as meaning, social connection, gratitude, autonomy, and purpose begin to matter more centrally.² This suggests that the modern tendency to identify happiness primarily with external success is insufficient and potentially misleading.

The philosophical tradition offers important resources for addressing this problem, especially in the work of Plato. Plato's relevance to the question of happiness lies in the fact that he does not treat happiness as a passing emotional state or as the successful gratification of desire. In the *Republic*, the question of happiness is inseparable from the question of justice, because Plato understands human flourishing as dependent on the proper order of the soul rather than on the abundance of external goods.³ His argument rests on a deeper philosophical anthropology. Human beings are not psychologically simple. The soul contains distinct motivational elements, and a good life depends on whether those elements are governed harmoniously. Plato's well-known tripartite account of the soul distinguishes reason, spirit, and appetite, each with its own tendencies and claims. Appetite seeks pleasure, acquisition, and bodily satisfaction. Spirit seeks recognition, honor, and assertion. Reason seeks truth, measure, and knowledge of what is genuinely good. Happiness becomes possible only when reason governs the soul, spirit supports rational order, and appetite accepts measure rather than domination.⁴

This framework is crucial because it explains why lives organized around external goods remain unstable. Plato's critique is not simply that money, comfort, or pleasure are morally inferior. His deeper claim is that appetite, if allowed to rule, has no internal principle of limitation. It wants more, then more again, and mistakes intensity for fulfillment. A person governed by appetite may enjoy temporary satisfactions, but such a life remains inwardly disordered because it is ruled by what is shifting, expansive, and fundamentally insatiable. Plato therefore relocates the problem of happiness from possession to psychic order. The decisive question is not how much one has, but whether

² Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5, no. 1 (July 2004): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2004.00501001.x>; Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, no. Volume 52, 2001 (February 2001): 141–66, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>.

³ Plato and C. D. C. Reeve, *Republic* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1992).

⁴ Craig Hassed, "The Freedom vs. Health Paradox," *The International Journal of Whole Person Care* 4, no. 1 (January 2017), <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v4i1.122>; Plato and Reeve, *Republic*.

one's desires are rightly governed. In this respect, happiness is not the reward of acquisition but the expression of an internally ordered life.⁵

Plato's account also deepens the discussion by linking happiness to epistemology. For Plato, one cannot live well without seeing rightly what is worth valuing. The disordered life is not merely morally weak. It is cognitively confused. It mistakes apparent goods for real goods and gives ultimate significance to what is contingent and unstable. This is why the *Republic* culminates in the idea of the Good, which functions as the highest object of knowledge and the orienting principle of a rightly ordered life.⁶ Happiness is thus inseparable from moral and intellectual vision. A person fails to flourish not only because of excessive desire, but because of a failure to discern the hierarchy of goods. External goods are not denied all value, but they are demoted from ends to instruments. The good life is possible only when desire is educated by reason and directed toward what has genuine worth.⁷

This Platonic approach is especially relevant to contemporary societies in which happiness is often pursued through consumption, visibility, and competitive self-advancement. Plato provides a conceptual language for understanding why these pursuits remain unsatisfying even when they succeed on their own terms. They intensify the appetitive and comparative dimensions of life without resolving the problem of inner order. For this reason, Plato's concept of *eudaimonia* should not be reduced to a general endorsement of virtue. It is a rigorous account of flourishing grounded in psychic harmony, moral discipline, and right orientation toward the good. Read in this way, Plato does not merely criticize superficial happiness. He explains why a life ruled by unstable desires cannot become genuinely happy at all.

At the same time, Plato's perspective does not exhaust the complexity of contemporary discussions of happiness. Modern well-being research has added important insight into the relational, emotional, and psychological dimensions of flourishing. Studies in psychology have shown that positive relationships, social belonging, gratitude,

⁵ Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁶ Plato and Reeve, *Republic*.

⁷ Alfred Edward Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work (RLE: Plato)* (Routledge, 2013), <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9780203101377&type=googlepdf>.

mindfulness, purpose, and self-determination are strongly associated with well-being.⁸ These findings do not simply displace philosophical reflection. Instead, they enrich it. They make visible the everyday practices and social conditions through which durable well-being is cultivated. They also clarify that happiness is not a purely inward and isolated state, but one closely connected to relatedness, attention, and meaningful engagement with life.

The distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being is especially useful here. Hedonic approaches emphasize pleasure, comfort, and the avoidance of distress. Eudaimonic approaches emphasize meaning, moral direction, self-realization, and the fulfillment of human capacities.⁹ The two are not absolute opposites, but they do foreground different assumptions about the good life. Plato clearly belongs to the eudaimonic tradition. He is not interested merely in whether a person feels pleased in the short term, but in whether a person lives well in a deeper and more enduring sense. The continuing relevance of this distinction lies in its ability to explain why some lives that appear successful from the outside still feel empty from within.

Another important issue concerns the social organization of happiness. Much modern discourse presents happiness as an individual acquisition project. One is expected to optimize the self through consumption, performance, visibility, and strategic self-improvement. Yet research repeatedly suggests that human flourishing is deeply relational. Belonging, trust, and meaningful connection are not decorative additions to well-being. They are among its foundations.¹⁰ A person may possess comfort and prestige while remaining alienated, lonely, and inwardly divided. In such cases, the problem is not the absence of external success but the absence of relational depth and existential coherence.

Gratitude and mindfulness add further important dimensions to this discussion. Gratitude reorients attention from lack toward appreciation and weakens the logic of

⁸ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* (US) 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>; Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Very Happy People," *Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 81–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415>; Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* (US) 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>; Alex M. Wood, Jeffrey J. Froh, and Adam W. A. Geraghty, "Gratitude and Well-Being: A Review and Theoretical Integration," *Clinical Psychology Review*, Positive Clinical Psychology, vol. 30, no. 7 (November 2010): 890–905, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.005>.

⁹ Ryan and Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials."

¹⁰ Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong"; Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review," *PLOS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (July 2010): e1000316, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>.

endless dissatisfaction. Mindfulness counters compulsive striving by cultivating present-centered awareness and reflective distance from desire.¹¹ These practices are not identical to Plato's ethical vocabulary, but they resonate with his concern for self-governance and right orientation. They also offer contemporary, practical ways of resisting the restless structures of desire that keep happiness always somewhere else.

Recent studies have increasingly recognized the need to connect philosophical and psychological accounts of happiness and well-being. Intelisano et al¹², for example, developed a dimensional taxonomy that maps philosophical and psychological theories according to their degree of stability and their emphasis on affective or cognitive processes. Their framework clarifies areas of convergence and divergence across disciplines, but it primarily serves a classificatory function and does not develop a substantive account of happiness grounded in a particular philosophical tradition. Brown and Potter¹³ similarly provide a systematic framework for distinguishing different forms of integration between the philosophy and psychology of well-being. Although their study demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary integration, it remains largely meta-theoretical and does not directly explain why externally oriented pursuits of happiness remain psychologically unstable.

More specifically, de Ray¹⁴ advances a Platonic theory of well-being in which awareness and appreciation of the Good are treated as essential to living well. This account strengthens the relevance of Plato to contemporary debates about well-being, but its primary focus remains philosophical and normative. It does not place Plato's account of psychic order and orientation toward the Good in sustained dialogue with empirical research on hedonic adaptation, social relationships, gratitude, and mindfulness. Taken together, previous studies have either mapped the relationship between philosophical and psychological theories, categorized possible forms of interdisciplinary integration, or reconstructed a Platonic theory of well-being. What remains insufficiently developed is a

¹¹ Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (US) 84, no. 2 (2003): 377–89, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.377>; Bassam Khoury et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Healthy Individuals: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 78, no. 6 (June 2015): 519–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2015.03.009>; Wood, Froh, and Geraghty, "Gratitude and Well-Being."

¹² "Integrating Philosophical and Psychological Accounts of Happiness and Well-Being," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 2020): 161–200, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00078-x>.

¹³ "Integrating the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being: An Opinionated Overview," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 25, no. 5 (May 2024): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-024-00763-6>.

¹⁴ "Seeing the Good—Towards a Platonic Theory of Well-Being," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, August 15, 2025, pqaf063, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaf063>.

focused synthesis that uses Plato's account of the ordered soul to explain the persistence of externally oriented happiness pursuits while also showing how contemporary psychological research identifies the relational and attentional conditions of more durable flourishing.

This article addresses that gap by placing Plato's concept of eudaimonia in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on happiness and well-being. The article has three main objectives. First, it seeks to explain why individuals continue to pursue happiness through external goods even when such pursuits repeatedly fail to provide lasting fulfillment. Second, it examines how Plato's account of the good life clarifies the limits of materialistic and pleasure-centered understandings of happiness. Third, it explores how contemporary research on relationships, gratitude, and mindfulness both supports and extends Platonic insight. The article does not argue that Plato anticipated modern psychology or that contemporary well-being research can simply replace philosophical analysis. Rather, it argues that reading them together produces a stronger and more coherent understanding of true happiness.

The article's main contribution lies in showing that Plato's account of happiness is not merely an ancient moral ideal but a rigorous theory of psychic order that helps explain the instability of modern, externally oriented happiness pursuits. By placing this Platonic framework in dialogue with contemporary well-being research, the study develops an integrated understanding of happiness as ethical, relational, and attentional flourishing rather than as the cumulative outcome of pleasure, status, or possession.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive literature review to examine the continuing search for happiness through a dialogue between Plato's concept of eudaimonia and contemporary scholarship on well-being. This design was chosen because the central research problem is conceptual and explanatory rather than experimental. The study does not seek to measure happiness statistically or to test a causal intervention with participants. Instead, it investigates how happiness has been understood, misidentified, and reoriented across philosophical and psychological traditions. A qualitative interpretive literature review is therefore appropriate because it allows the

researcher to synthesize foundational texts, clarify key concepts, and trace thematic connections across bodies of literature that are usually studied separately.¹⁵

The review is anchored in two main groups of sources. The first consists of Plato's Republic as the primary philosophical text, supported by selected secondary scholarship on Platonic ethics, virtue, self-governance, the tripartite soul, justice, and the nature of the good life. The second consists of major works in contemporary psychology and well-being studies, especially those concerning subjective well-being, hedonic adaptation, eudaimonic flourishing, relatedness, gratitude, mindfulness, and sustainable happiness. Sources were selected purposively rather than exhaustively. The aim was not to compile every existing text on happiness, but to assemble a coherent body of scholarship capable of addressing the research objectives directly.

The inclusion of sources followed four main considerations. First, the source had to address happiness, flourishing, subjective well-being, or a directly related concept such as gratitude, mindfulness, meaning, or social connection. Second, the source had to contribute either theoretical clarification or empirical evidence relevant to the question of why external success often fails to yield enduring fulfillment. Third, the review prioritized widely cited peer-reviewed journal articles, classical philosophical texts, and established academic books. Fourth, sources were selected on the basis of their interpretive relevance to the central dialogue of the study, namely the relationship between Platonic eudaimonia and contemporary well-being research.

The analysis proceeded through repeated close reading and thematic synthesis. In the first stage, the selected texts were read to identify recurring ideas concerning external goods, pleasure, dissatisfaction, desire, virtue, self-rule, gratitude, mindfulness, meaning, and relational well-being. In the second stage, these ideas were grouped into broader analytical themes that could organize the discussion coherently across disciplines. The resulting themes were: the instability of externally grounded happiness, eudaimonia as psychic order, the relational basis of flourishing, gratitude and mindfulness as practices of reorientation, and the need for an integrated account of true happiness. These themes were not treated as isolated categories, but as interconnected strands through which the central argument of the article could be developed.

¹⁵ Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (November 2019): 333–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.

The interpretive nature of the method is important. The article does not present empirical findings in the sense of survey data, interviews, or experiments conducted within this study. Rather, the “findings” refer to what the review and synthesis of the literature indicate regarding the nature of happiness and the limitations of materialistic models of well-being. Because the study is conceptual and literature-based, its claims are framed in terms such as the review suggests, the analysis indicates, and the thematic synthesis shows, rather than as direct empirical generalizations from newly collected field data.

To strengthen methodological rigor, the study employed cross-disciplinary triangulation while maintaining the conceptual boundaries of each disciplinary tradition. Conceptual consistency was maintained in three ways. First, philosophical and psychological sources were examined through a common set of analytical questions concerning the nature of happiness, the structure of desire, the role of external goods, and the conditions of enduring flourishing. These shared questions provided consistent points of comparison without requiring the concepts used by each discipline to have identical meanings.

Second, concepts were interpreted according to their original disciplinary contexts. Platonic concepts such as eudaimonia, psychic order, appetite, reason, justice, and the Good were interpreted primarily within Plato’s philosophical and normative framework. Psychological concepts such as subjective well-being, hedonic adaptation, gratitude, mindfulness, and relatedness were interpreted according to their established theoretical definitions and empirical functions. Accordingly, gratitude and mindfulness were not treated as concepts developed by Plato, and Platonic eudaimonia was not reduced to a contemporary psychological measure of life satisfaction.

Third, the synthesis distinguished conceptual equivalence from functional convergence. Concepts from the two traditions were integrated only when they addressed a comparable analytical problem, such as the regulation of desire, the instability of externally grounded satisfaction, or the conditions of sustained flourishing. The emerging themes were repeatedly checked against the original sources and the research objectives to ensure that the synthesis did not remove concepts from their contexts or attribute claims to one tradition that belonged to the other. Through this procedure, philosophy and

psychology were treated as distinct but mutually illuminating bodies of knowledge rather than as interchangeable explanatory systems.

The analytical framework in Table 1 was developed from recurring themes in previous philosophical and psychological studies on happiness and well-being. Although earlier studies have compared philosophical and psychological perspectives or developed Platonic accounts of well-being, they have not fully explained why externally oriented pursuits of happiness often fail to provide lasting fulfillment. The five themes in Table 1 were therefore organized to address this gap by connecting external dissatisfaction, Platonic psychic order, relational flourishing, gratitude, mindfulness, and an integrated account of happiness.

Table 1. Analytical Framework of the Study

THEME	GUIDING QUESTION	MAIN CONCEPTUAL FUNCTION
EXTERNAL SUCCESS AND DISSATISFACTION	Why do wealth, status, and possession fail to secure lasting happiness?	Explains the persistence of the happiness paradox.
PLATONIC EUDAIMONIA	How does Plato redefine happiness beyond pleasure and possession?	Provides the normative core of the argument
RELATIONAL FLOURISHING	Why are meaningful relationships central to well-being?	Extends happiness beyond individual acquisition
GRATITUDE AND MINDFULNESS	How do these practices reshape desire and attention?	Offers practical mechanisms of reorientation
INTEGRATED ACCOUNT OF HAPPINESS	How can Platonic ethics and modern well-being research be connected?	Generates the article’s conceptual contribution

The study has several clear boundaries. It does not offer a comprehensive history of all philosophical theories of happiness, nor does it review every branch of contemporary well-being research. Its focus remains intentionally limited to Plato and selected strands of psychological scholarship that speak most directly to the themes of

virtue, desire, gratitude, mindfulness, and relational well-being. These limits are deliberate. They help preserve conceptual coherence and keep the article closely aligned with its research objectives.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. External Success Often Fails Because It Is Asked to Deliver More Than It Can Give

The thematic review suggests that one of the main reasons people continue searching for happiness is that external goods are frequently treated as if they could provide complete fulfillment. Wealth, social recognition, attractive lifestyles, and achievement are often represented as final destinations rather than partial and unstable supports. Yet the literature consistently indicates that these goods do not possess the durability many people expect from them. They may increase comfort, convenience, and sometimes self-confidence, but they rarely settle the deeper question of what makes a life genuinely good.

A major reason for this instability is hedonic adaptation. Individuals commonly adjust to improved circumstances and soon begin to experience those improvements as normal rather than extraordinary.¹⁶ What was once desired intensely becomes familiar, and the emotional gains attached to it diminish. This process helps explain why the pursuit of happiness through acquisition becomes self-renewing. Once one target is reached, another takes its place. Satisfaction is brief, but desire expands.

This does not mean that external conditions are irrelevant. Financial security, health, safety, and freedom from severe deprivation matter greatly. The point is more specific. External conditions are often mistaken for sufficient conditions of happiness when in fact they are, at best, partial contributors. The review indicates that the modern pursuit of happiness becomes unstable when comfort and success are expected to perform the work of meaning, identity, and existential completion. In those cases, disappointment is not accidental. It is built into the structure of the pursuit itself.

Social comparison intensifies the problem. External success is visible, and what is visible is easily ranked. A person who defines happiness by material or status

¹⁶ Diener et al., "Subjective Well-Being"; Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon, and David Schkade, "Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change," *Review of General Psychology* 9, no. 2 (June 2005): 111–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.111>.

indicators rarely compares the present simply to past deprivation. More often, one compares the present to the lives of others. This produces a moving standard of enough. Someone always has more wealth, more prestige, more visibility, or a more desirable lifestyle. Happiness then becomes inseparable from competition, and competition rarely produces lasting peace.¹⁷

The review therefore suggests that the repeated search for happiness is not simply a matter of poor personal discipline. It is also shaped by cultural narratives that teach people to treat externally measurable success as the primary sign of a good life. These narratives are powerful because external success is legible, celebrated, and socially rewarded. Yet the more happiness is tied to what is public and comparative, the more fragile it becomes. A life organized primarily around acquisition tends to remain exposed to instability because it depends on what is changing, visible, and never fully secure.

This first finding is crucial because it clarifies that the happiness problem cannot be solved merely by telling people to desire less. The deeper issue is that modern cultures often educate desire in misleading ways. They encourage individuals to expect from money, prestige, and consumption what these goods cannot finally provide. To address the problem of happiness seriously, one must therefore go beyond behavioral advice and ask a philosophical question: what kind of thing is happiness, if it is not simply the possession of desirable externals?

Previous studies on hedonic adaptation and the focusing illusion explain why improvements in income, possessions, and circumstances often produce only temporary gains in well-being.¹⁸ However, these studies primarily describe the psychological instability of external satisfaction and provide less explanation of why individuals continue to treat external goods as ultimate ends. The present study advances this discussion by interpreting such instability as both a psychological process and a normative error concerning what is genuinely worth pursuing.

¹⁷ Daniel Kahneman et al., "Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion," *Science* 312, no. 5782 (June 2006): 1908–10, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1129688>; Mads Larsen and Nina Witoszek, *Evolutionary Perspectives on Enhancing Quality of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

¹⁸ Diener et al., "Subjective Well-Being"; Kahneman et al., "Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer?"; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade, "Pursuing Happiness."

2. Plato Reframes Happiness as Psychic Order Oriented Toward the Good

The review indicates that Plato offers more than a moral preference for moderation. He provides a systematic account of why happiness must be understood as the condition of a rightly ordered soul rather than as the possession of pleasurable or prestigious externals. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that justice in the city mirrors justice in the soul. A just person is not merely someone who behaves well outwardly, but someone whose inner life has achieved proper proportion among its constituent parts: reason rules, spirit supports reason's judgments, and appetite remains under discipline ¹⁹. Happiness, in this framework, is inseparable from order. It is not primarily something one feels at a given moment, but something one becomes through the right governance of desire and action.

This argument matters because it allows Plato to challenge the common assumption that happiness follows naturally from getting what one wants. For Plato, this assumption is philosophically naive because it ignores the prior question of whether what one wants is worth wanting in the first place. Appetite is not a reliable guide to flourishing. It is expansive, unstable, and prone to excess. When appetite dominates the soul, the self becomes fragmented, moving from one object of desire to another without any stable principle of measure. In such a state, satisfaction cannot last, because the structure of desire itself remains disordered. The problem is therefore not merely moral indulgence. It is ontological and psychological instability. A life ruled by appetite cannot be whole, and what is not whole cannot genuinely flourish.²⁰

Plato's analysis is sharpened by his comparison of different forms of life. In Books VIII and IX of the *Republic*, he contrasts the aristocratic or rationally ordered soul with timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical souls, each corresponding to a different pattern of desire and rule.²¹ This typology shows that not all satisfactions are equal because not all selves are equally well ordered. The tyrannical person, who appears to enjoy maximum freedom to satisfy desire, is in fact the least free and the least happy, because such a life is ruled by compulsion rather than reason. Plato's point is strikingly relevant to modern discussions of happiness. A life of unlimited wanting may appear liberating, but it produces dependence on craving, emotional volatility,

¹⁹ Plato and Reeve, *Republic*.

²⁰ Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*; Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*.

²¹ Plato and Reeve, *Republic*.

and chronic dissatisfaction. The apparent abundance of options does not create flourishing if the self lacks order.

Plato also advances a qualitative distinction among pleasures. He does not deny that bodily or acquisitive pleasures exist, nor does he simply condemn them. Rather, he argues that pleasures differ according to the part of the soul with which they are associated and the level of reality to which they are directed. Pleasures tied to appetite are more unstable because they depend on recurrent lack and replenishment. By contrast, the pleasures of learning, contemplation, and rational insight are higher because they are connected to what is more enduring and more truly fulfilling²². Happiness, then, cannot be understood by merely counting pleasurable episodes. One must ask what kinds of pleasure are being pursued, what kind of soul pursues them, and whether those pleasures support or undermine the order of the self.

Another reason Plato remains analytically important is that his theory of happiness is inseparable from his theory of knowledge. The good life requires not only discipline but orientation. A person must perceive rightly what is genuinely valuable. This is why the Form of the Good occupies such a central place in the *Republic*. The Good is not simply one object among others. It is the highest principle that makes right judgment and right living possible. Without some orientation toward the Good, human beings are vulnerable to mistaking appearance for reality and fleeting satisfaction for genuine flourishing. Plato therefore shows that unhappiness is not only a failure of restraint but also a failure of vision. One pursues lesser goods as absolutes because one has not yet understood the order of goods.²³

This helps explain why Plato is especially relevant to the modern happiness paradox. Contemporary consumer cultures intensify precisely the forms of desire that Plato regards as politically and psychologically dangerous: acquisitiveness, comparison, performative status-seeking, and the confusion of freedom with unlimited satisfaction. Plato's critique enables a deeper reading of this condition. The failure of external success to produce lasting happiness is not accidental. It reflects the inability of externally grounded goods to supply what only an ordered soul can provide. Wealth, prestige, and possession are unstable because they are vulnerable to comparison, loss,

²² Roger Crisp and Morten Kringelbach, "Higher and Lower Pleasures Revisited: Evidence from Neuroscience," *Neuroethics* 11, no. 2 (July 2018): 211–15, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12152-017-9339-2>; Plato and Reeve, *Republic*.

²³ Taylor, *Plato*.

and repetition. A person who entrusts happiness to them remains dependent on circumstances that cannot furnish enduring wholeness.

At the same time, the review suggests that Plato should not be interpreted as offering a rejection of all external or embodied goods. His position is more precise. External goods become dangerous when they are elevated into ultimate ends and allowed to govern the shape of life. Their disordering power lies not in their mere existence but in their misplacement within the hierarchy of value. This is an important distinction for the present article because it prevents a simplistic opposition between inner virtue and all material life. Plato's deeper point is that flourishing depends on proper order, not ascetic negation. External goods may have instrumental value, but they cannot ground happiness because they do not address the fundamental condition of the soul.

Read in this way, Plato gives the article a far stronger theoretical foundation. He explains why the search for happiness often becomes endless, why desire cannot be trusted uncritically, why some pleasures fail to fulfill, and why flourishing requires a reordering of the self rather than an expansion of possessions. His account therefore does more than morally criticize materialism. It reveals that the endless pursuit of externally mediated satisfaction is a symptom of psychic disorder. The search for happiness becomes coherent only when it is redirected toward inner harmony, rational self-governance, and right orientation toward the good.

Previous Platonic scholarship has established that happiness depends on virtue, justice, rational self-government, and the proper ordering of the soul ²⁴. Its limitation for the present problem is that it generally remains within philosophical interpretation and does not directly engage contemporary evidence on adaptation, comparison, and well-being. This study extends that literature by using Plato's account of psychic order to explain the persistence of externally oriented happiness pursuits in contemporary life.

²⁴ Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*; Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*.

3. Meaningful Relationships Are Constitutive of Flourishing, Not Merely Supportive of It

A third major theme in the literature is that happiness is deeply relational. The review suggests that one of the weaknesses of externally organized happiness is that it often individualizes flourishing too narrowly. It imagines happiness as a private possession, secured through personal acquisition and displayed through personal success. Contemporary research, however, consistently indicates that well-being is strongly tied to social connection, belonging, and meaningful relationships²⁵.

This finding matters because it broadens the understanding of happiness beyond the self as consumer or achiever. Human beings do not simply need comfort and opportunity. They also need recognition, affection, companionship, and trustworthy bonds. Social belonging is not merely emotionally pleasant. It supports resilience, self-worth, and long-term well-being. The happiest lives are rarely those marked only by accumulation. More often, they are those marked by depth of connection and the experience of being known and valued.

The review suggests that this relational dimension helps explain why success can feel hollow when it is not accompanied by shared meaning. Material goods may be enjoyed privately, but many of the most significant forms of happiness are relationally mediated. Joy deepens when it is recognized, shared, or supported by others. Meaning intensifies when it is rooted in commitment and mutual care. Achievement feels less empty when it is embedded in a life of belonging rather than isolation. In this sense, relationships do not simply add comfort to an already flourishing life. They partly constitute what flourishing is.

This point also refines the Platonic framework. Plato does not develop interpersonal well-being in the vocabulary used by contemporary psychology, but he does understand human flourishing as inseparable from right order and ethical relation. The just soul and the just community are connected. A life that is good cannot be built on private appetite alone. Contemporary research makes this insight more concrete by showing that secure attachment, social support, and relational trust have measurable

²⁵ Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong"; Diener and Seligman, "Very Happy People"; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk."

and durable effects on well-being. In this way, modern scholarship extends Platonic ethics into the lived structures of everyday happiness.

The study's central argument is strengthened by this theme. If people continue searching for happiness through external goods, one reason is that those goods can be counted and displayed more easily than relational depth can. Consumer cultures reward what is visible, measurable, and comparable. Relationships, by contrast, require time, vulnerability, reciprocity, and forms of attention that are less easily commodified. Yet the review indicates that happiness is more dependent on those relational goods than on the visible markers that often dominate public understandings of success.

This suggests that the modern pursuit of happiness is not merely too materialistic. It is often too solitary. It treats flourishing as if it could be achieved through self-expansion alone. The reviewed literature suggests otherwise. Flourishing becomes more durable when the self is not merely expanding outward through acquisition, but also deepening through relation. To neglect this is to misunderstand one of the basic conditions of human well-being.

Psychological studies consistently demonstrate that belonging, social support, and meaningful relationships are central to well-being.²⁶ However, these studies tend to explain the benefits of relationships without fully connecting them to a normative account of the good life. The present study advances this literature by positioning relationships not merely as predictors of well-being, but as constitutive elements of ethically grounded flourishing.

4. Gratitude and Mindfulness Reorient Desire Rather Than Merely Improve

Mood

This deeper reading of Plato also clarifies how the themes of gratitude, mindfulness, and meaningful relationships should be positioned in the article. These themes are not modern additions loosely attached to an ancient framework. Rather, they can be read as contemporary practices and conditions that support what Plato identifies as the discipline of desire and the ordering of the self. Gratitude weakens appetitive dissatisfaction by teaching the self to recognize sufficiency rather than

²⁶ Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong"; Diener and Seligman, "Very Happy People"; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk."

perpetual lack. Mindfulness creates reflective distance from impulse and helps prevent desire from becoming tyrannical. Meaningful relationships counter the illusion that happiness is a self-enclosed achievement by embedding flourishing within reciprocal and ethically significant forms of life. In this sense, contemporary well-being research does not displace Plato. It operationalizes and extends some of his deepest concerns in a language more accessible to present discussions of human flourishing.

Gratitude is significant because it interrupts deficiency-based consciousness. A person oriented primarily toward what is missing tends to postpone happiness into the future. Fulfillment is imagined as the result of obtaining whatever has not yet been secured. Gratitude weakens this structure by directing attention toward goods already present and by cultivating appreciation rather than constant comparison.²⁷ This does not eliminate ambition or deny hardship. Instead, it challenges the assumption that a good life can only begin after one more acquisition, one more validation, or one more achievement.

The review suggests that gratitude is not merely an emotional exercise. It is a moral and interpretive discipline. It trains the self to perceive sufficiency where restless desire sees only lack. In this sense, gratitude aligns with the Platonic concern for governing appetite. A person cannot move toward flourishing if desire is always defining the good as something absent. Gratitude moderates this condition by restoring the visibility of what is already meaningful, supportive, and valuable.

Mindfulness performs a related but distinct function. Where gratitude addresses the logic of deficiency, mindfulness addresses the logic of distraction and compulsive anticipation. Much of modern unhappiness emerges from the inability to remain present without projecting fulfillment into a future state. Happiness is imagined as something that will finally arrive once a particular goal is reached. The present is therefore used instrumentally rather than inhabited attentively. Mindfulness counters this habit by cultivating awareness of present experience without immediate judgment or reaction.²⁸

The thematic synthesis suggests that mindfulness matters for happiness because it creates space between desire and identification. A desire may arise, but it need not

²⁷ Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens"; Wood, Froh, and Geraghty, "Gratitude and Well-Being."

²⁸ Khoury et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Healthy Individuals."

automatically govern action or define worth. This is highly relevant to Plato's emphasis on self-rule. Although mindfulness does not emerge from Platonic metaphysics, it supports a similar practical aim: the self should not be carried passively by every appetite or emotional impulse. Instead, there should be reflective distance, discernment, and a capacity to respond rather than merely react.

Taken together, gratitude and mindfulness help explain how the pursuit of happiness can be reoriented in practical terms. They do not solve structural inequality, replace relationships, or eliminate the importance of material security. What they do is address the internal habits that make happiness perpetually unstable: comparison, anticipation, compulsive striving, and the inability to recognize value except in what is not yet possessed. In that sense, they provide an important bridge between philosophical diagnosis and lived practice.

This matters for the coherence of the present article because the argument is not simply that external goods fail. The stronger claim is that durable happiness requires a transformed orientation to desire, value, and presence. Gratitude and mindfulness make that claim concrete. They show how reorientation is not only philosophically defensible but also psychologically actionable.

Previous research has shown that gratitude and mindfulness can improve well-being, reduce stress, and redirect attention toward present experience.²⁹ Nevertheless, these practices are often discussed as separate psychological interventions rather than as parts of a broader theory of desire and self-governance. This study integrates them with the Platonic framework by interpreting gratitude and mindfulness as practical mechanisms that support the reorientation and regulation of desire.

5. A More Adequate Account of Happiness Requires Integration Rather Than Simple Opposition

The final theme of the review is that Plato's account remains highly valuable but becomes most persuasive when integrated with contemporary well-being research. The evidence reviewed in this study does not support a simplistic opposition between ancient philosophy and modern psychology, or between pleasure and flourishing, or

²⁹ Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens"; Khoury et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Healthy Individuals"; Wood, Froh, and Geraghty, "Gratitude and Well-Being."

between external goods and inner virtue. Rather, it suggests the need for a more balanced and integrated account.

Plato is right to reject the idea that happiness can be reduced to pleasure, status, or possession. He is also right to insist that self-governance and inner order are central to the good life. Yet a purely Platonic account, taken in isolation, may understate several important aspects of human flourishing. First, modern research makes clear that external conditions such as security, health, and freedom from chronic hardship do matter. Happiness cannot be built on severe deprivation. Second, emotional well-being is not trivial. Pleasure, delight, and psychological ease are not the whole of flourishing, but they are part of it. Third, relational belonging is not merely a consequence of flourishing. It is one of its conditions.

The review therefore suggests that the most adequate understanding of happiness is one in which Platonic eudaimonia provides the normative center, while contemporary well-being research clarifies the relational, emotional, and practical supports that make flourishing more fully intelligible. This integrated view does not collapse happiness into mood, nor does it reduce the good life to an austere model of virtue detached from ordinary human needs. Instead, it presents happiness as a reflective, relational, and ethically guided form of life. To clarify the distinctions and convergence among these perspectives, the key dimensions of the external-acquisitive model, the Platonic model, and the integrated model proposed in this study are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative Model of Happiness

DIMENSION	EXTERNAL- ACQUISITIVE MODEL	PLATONIC MODEL	INTEGRATED MODEL IN THIS STUDY
MAIN SOURCE OF HAPPINESS	Wealth, possessions, status, achievement	Virtue, justice, reason, ordered soul	Ethical self-formation supported by relationships, gratitude, mindfulness, and sufficient material security
STRUCTURE OF DESIRE	Expansive and comparative	To be governed and educated	To be governed, appreciated, and reoriented

ROLE OF PLEASURE	Central end	Secondary and unstable	Valuable but not sufficient
ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS	Optional or instrumental	Indirectly tied to justice and order	Constitutive of flourishing
TEMPORAL ORIENTATION	Future-driven and deferring	Stability through virtue	Present-aware, purposeful, and sustainable

This integrated account allows the article to answer its central question more precisely. People continue searching for happiness because they are often guided by culturally dominant models that privilege externally visible success while neglecting inner order, relational depth, and the disciplined reorientation of desire. The search persists not because happiness is impossible, but because its object is frequently misdefined. When happiness is understood instead as flourishing grounded in character, relation, gratitude, mindfulness, and meaningful purpose, the search changes form. It becomes less frantic, less comparative, and less dependent on unstable externals.

The contribution of the present study lies here. Rather than treating Plato as merely historical or modern well-being research as merely technical, the article shows that these traditions become more illuminating when read together. Plato explains why the pursuit of external goods is structurally incapable of securing lasting fulfillment. Contemporary scholarship explains how flourishing is supported in ordinary life through relationship, gratitude, mindful attention, and need satisfaction. Together they provide a stronger account of true happiness than either tradition can fully supply alone.

Previous studies have distinguished hedonic from eudaimonic well-being and demonstrated the importance of meaning, autonomy, relationships, and psychological need satisfaction.³⁰ However, philosophical and psychological accounts often remain parallel rather than fully integrated. The present study advances the literature by proposing an account of happiness in which Platonic ethics provides the normative

³⁰ Ryan and Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials."

foundation, while contemporary psychology explains the relational, emotional, and attentional conditions that support enduring flourishing.

D. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the continuing search for happiness is sustained not simply by the intensity of human desire, but by a persistent conceptual error in how happiness is understood. In contemporary life, wealth, status, possessions, and achievement are often treated as if they were sufficient foundations of fulfillment. The analysis suggests, however, that such externally oriented pursuits remain unstable because they are vulnerable to adaptation, comparison, and the endless expansion of desire. As a result, they may generate temporary satisfaction, but they rarely provide the depth or durability associated with genuine flourishing.

By returning to Plato's concept of *eudaimonia*, this article has shown that happiness is more adequately understood as a condition of psychic order, ethical self-governance, and right orientation toward the good. Plato's importance lies not only in his critique of pleasure-centered life, but in his deeper explanation of why a life ruled by appetite cannot become fully whole or genuinely happy. At the same time, the article has demonstrated that Platonic insight becomes more analytically fruitful when placed in dialogue with contemporary well-being research. Meaningful relationships, gratitude, and mindfulness do not displace Plato's framework, but extend it by clarifying the relational and practical conditions through which enduring flourishing can be cultivated in lived experience.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in developing an integrated account of happiness that connects Platonic *eudaimonia* with modern well-being scholarship. Rather than treating happiness as either subjective pleasure or purely abstract virtue, the article proposes a more balanced understanding of happiness as ethical, relational, and attentional flourishing. This integrated perspective helps explain why externally successful lives may remain inwardly unsatisfied, while also showing that more durable happiness depends on the reorientation of desire, the cultivation of inner order, and the strengthening of meaningful human connection.

This study is limited by its interpretive and literature-based design and therefore does not provide new empirical evidence from particular populations or settings. Future research may extend the argument through cross-cultural comparison, empirical investigation, or applied studies on how gratitude, mindfulness, and relational practices

interact with value formation and self-governance. Even with these limitations, the central conclusion remains clear: happiness becomes more sustainable when it is understood not as possession or momentary pleasure, but as a cultivated form of flourishing grounded in inner order, relational depth, and reflective ways of living.

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