

Redefining Happiness: A New Framework Integrating Western and Ancient Japanese Perspectives into the Modern Context

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Abstract

Happiness occupies a central position across philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, biology, and economics. Yet, this concept resists singular definition, typically construed through multidimensional indicators. Prevailing models often offer partial solutions by reducing happiness to measurable components, addressing immediate challenges like social fragmentation and environmental degradation. However, these reductionist approaches remain inadequate at a holistic level, exposing fundamental theoretical limitations regarding human experience. This study proposes reconceptualizing happiness to bridge this critical epistemological gap effectively. Through a comparative analysis of Western and Japanese cultural frameworks, this research delineates divergent conceptual trajectories clearly. The Western lineage traces a historical transition from Aristotelian virtue ethics through Kantian moral autonomy to Bentham-Mill utilitarianism. This evolution represents a significant shift from social virtue toward interiorized individuality, subsequently progressing into self-isolation and the rigorous quantification of well-being, though recent trends suggest a necessary return to origins. Conversely, ancient Japanese thought, particularly during the Jōmon period, conceived happiness as *wa* (harmony). This unique perspective situated the self not as an isolated entity but as deeply embedded within interdependent networks characterized by relational and ecological attunement. Historical examination reveals that *wa* eventually evolved from supporting communal cohesion toward rigidity accompanied by excessive conformity pressure. Neither framework alone suffices to address modern existential complexities fully. Significantly, both Western and Japanese contexts exhibit emerging perspectives that seek a return to origins, suggesting an imminent paradigmatic shift in discourse concerning human well-being glob-

ally. Consequently, this paper advances an integrative theoretical framework synthesizing the Western tradition of personal autonomy with harmony-based conceptions of happiness found in ancient Japan. By simultaneously respecting individual agency and collective harmony and addressing the fundamental challenges of social division and environmental collapse, we propose a sustainable, universally inclusive pathway for reconstructing human happiness. This integration offers a concrete route advancing from paradigms of division toward deep ontological integration, providing a robust foundation for future well-being research and policy development.

Keywords

Happiness, Ontological Happiness, *wa* (Harmony), Relational Autonomy, Paradigm Shift

1. Introduction

The problem of happiness has been considered one of humanity's most universal and enduring concerns. Beginning with ethical and philosophical examination, this question is now being reexamined through diverse methodological perspectives, including positive psychology, neuroscientific investigation of reward mechanisms, biological analysis of correlations between happiness and gene expression, and economic approaches based on marginal utility theory (Seligman, 2011; Davidson, 2012).

However, these multifaceted approaches have not presented a unified definition of happiness, tending instead to unfold under the umbrella concept of "well-being." Well-being is often decomposed and measured across multiple dimensions: physical (health), psychological (positive thinking and emotional stability), and social (connection with others and social support) (Ryff, 1989). This trend of quantifying and managing happiness has been critically examined as a form of "happiness industry" that instrumentalizes human emotions for economic and political ends (Davies, 2015). Furthermore, conventional metrics such as GDP or subjective well-being scores are increasingly criticized for ignoring the ecological costs of human prosperity, revealing that high levels of reported happiness often coexist with severe environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption patterns (Marks et al., 2006).

These approaches were developed primarily within conceptual frameworks derived from Western individualist traditions, which, as Durkheim (2014) warned, risk generating anomie when the organic solidarity necessary for complex societies fails to materialize. Consequently, current models that presuppose the individual pursuit of happiness have been criticized as insufficient to address structural and collective challenges confronting modern society, such as widespread social isolation and intensifying environmental degradation (Seligman, 2011; Helliwell et al., 2020). This isolation is further compounded by the rise of "emotional

capitalism,” where intimate relationships are increasingly shaped by market logics of efficiency and calculation, turning human connection into a managed resource rather than a source of genuine community (Illouz, 2007).

This study aims to reconstruct a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding happiness through a comparative analysis of two distinct philosophical traditions: the legacy of Western rationalism and Eastern, particularly ancient Japanese (primarily Jōmon period), conceptualization of “*wa*.” To maintain analytical clarity, this paper juxtaposes two ideal types as working assumptions—“Western Individualism” and “Japanese Relationalism (*wa*)”—to illuminate structural challenges confronting modern society. As will become clear in Section 2, this does not deny actual diversity and mixture within both traditions but functions as an analytical apparatus for highlighting structural problems modern society faces. Specifically, we construct a new happiness theory capable of responding to modern societal complexity by integrating conceptual evolution, rooted in individual autonomy and deepening interiority in the Western tradition, with the prioritization of harmony with others and nature in the Eastern tradition.

The binary framework used in this research—the contrast between “Western Individualism” and “Japanese Relationalism”—constitutes ideal types in the Weberian sense (Weber, 2017). Western intellectual history includes strong communitarian traditions irreducible to individualism (for example, Aristotle’s polis, Rousseau’s general will, Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*, Durkheim’s organic solidarity). Similarly, Japanese history includes class structures, power asymmetries, and forms of alienation complicating simple “harmony” explanations. This duality was adopted to reveal dominant tendencies influencing contemporary institutions and self-understanding, with explicit recognition that neither tradition is homogeneous.

2. Methodology: Comparative Framework, Source Selection, and Scope

2.1. Comparative Design and Analytical Axes

This study adopts a comparative philosophical methodology influenced by Max Weber’s concept of ideal types. Rather than claiming to provide an exhaustive description of either tradition, the analysis constructs two heuristic frameworks—“Western Individualism” and “Japanese Relationalism (*wa*)”—that reveal structural contrasts relevant to contemporary well-being. This ideal-typical approach does not deny considerable internal diversity and historical interaction between traditions but, following precedents by Nisbett et al. (2001) and Nakane (1967), is explicitly adopted as an analytical device.

First, we explain why two traditions were adopted:

- **Western Tradition:** Essential for discussing modern society because contemporary social structures are founded upon this Western legacy.
- **Japanese Tradition:** Ancient ontological foundations represent human origins and serve as the study’s ontological reference point. While animism, as a representative of ancient worldviews, can be found among several nations and ethnic

groups, Japan maintains animism into the present, especially as the Shinto spirit.

Comparative Analysis Proceeds along Three Analytical Axes:

1) Ontological Positioning of the Self: This study examines whether the self is conceived as an autonomous, separable entity (individualism) or as an interdependent node within relational networks (relationalism), considering happiness from the relationship between individuals and collectives (the whole).

2) Location of Happiness: Does happiness reside within individual interiority (virtue, autonomy, pleasure), or in qualities of engagement with others, nature, and the sacred?

3) Relationship between Individual and Collective: Is the collective understood as an accumulation of individuals, or as an indivisible whole expressed through individuals?

2.2. Selection Criteria for Thinkers and Texts

Thinkers and texts were selected according to three criteria:

1) Representative Status: Each figure plays an important role in the intellectual genealogy of happiness within respective traditions.

2) Conceptual Clarity: Each thinker addresses happiness, well-being, or the nature of the good life explicitly (in Kant's case), or mentions concepts greatly influencing contemporary understanding of individual welfare (autonomy, moral agency).

3) Logical Relevance: Each selection clarifies the structural contrast between individualism and relationalism, framing this study.

Western thinkers were systematically selected, tracing a systematic arc from Aristotle (*eudaimonia*), Rousseau (interiority), Kant (autonomy), Bentham/Mill (utilitarianism), to Nussbaum (relational re-embedding). Japanese materials were selected to explore the origins of happiness as humans stripped of modern societal conditions, prioritizing sources representing primitive ontological happiness characterized by peaceful communal life with minimal conflict. These function sufficiently as comparative background factors when discussing common challenges facing modern society. The aim is that Japan's transformed cases through Western additions may provide insights for addressing common challenges modern society confronts.

2.3. Temporal Scope of "Ancient Japan"

"Ancient Japan" in this study refers primarily to the Jōmon period as an ontological foundation (10,000 BCE-300 BCE), includes transitional contexts from Yayoi through Asuka periods (300-710 CE) as supplementary references, and takes Nara through early Heian (710-800 CE) as records of worldview preservation amid social transformation:

Core Period—Jōmon Period (Approximately 10,000 BCE-300 BCE):

Archaeological records suggest a prolonged period of cooperative social structures characterized by limited class stratification and no conclusive evidence of large-scale warfare or systematic violence (Umemura, 2002). While this points to a relatively peaceful existence, it should also be noted that the absence of archaeological evidence prevents the definitive exclusion of smaller-scale conflicts or in-

tergroup tensions that may have left few traces. This period functions as the primary ontological reference point for understanding happiness stripped of hierarchical social conditions. Analysis specifically cites this era representing people within non-alienated relational harmony with others and nature.

Supplementary Documentation—Nara through Early Heian (710–800 CE):

- **Kojiki (712 CE):** Compiled by Ōno Yasumaro by command of Empress Genmei. Japan’s oldest chronicle, combining mythology, genealogy, and semi-historical content.
- **Nihon Shoki (720 CE):** Official 30-volume history compiled by Prince Toneri and court scholars under imperial command, treating events from mythological origins through 697 CE.
- **Manyōshū (Approximately 759 CE):** Japan’s oldest poetry anthology containing over 4500 poems spanning from the mid-7th century through 759 CE, with Ōtomo no Yakamochi as principal compiler.

These texts represent unique Japanese worldviews (cognitive styles with continuity between nature and humans), documenting the preservation of ancient relational consciousness even as class structures began forming. Later philosophical works (for example, Nishida, 1921; Hamaguchi, 1989) are referenced as modern reconstructions rather than direct continuations.

Important Distinction: We explicitly distinguish:

Jōmon Period: Non-hierarchical communal life with extremely minimal friction (our primary ontological reference point).

Later Periods: Documented within hierarchical structures based on *wa*.

This distinction prevents overgeneralization, clarifying that claims of “harmonious ancient Japan” refer to the Jōmon period, as supported by specific archaeological evidence and preserved textual records of the worldview.

2.4. Source Classification and Evidence Transparency

Claims in this study rest on three categories:

1) Interpretation of Primary Literature: Interpretations from Kojiki, Nihon Shoki, Manyōshū, and Western canonical works (Aristotle, Kant, Rousseau, Mill). As the author cannot directly access original texts, reliable translated versions or annotated editions serve as proxies for primary texts. These interpretations constitute the empirical foundation of analysis.

2) Scholarly Interpretation: Secondary scholarly research (for example, Kagawa, 1997; Nakane, 1967; Nussbaum, 2001) provides interpretive frameworks for understanding primary texts. When scholarly interpretations conflict, this study identifies those discrepancies.

3) Archaeological Speculation: Recognized as interpretively reconstructed based on modern archaeology, not asserted as conclusive evidence of ancient beliefs. Such speculation is presented with acknowledgment of its hypothetical nature.

Distinctions between these three categories are maintained throughout the analysis. When moving beyond textual evidence to broader cultural generalizations, this is explicitly flagged as an interpretive argument rather than an estab-

lished fact.

3. Genealogy of Western Happiness Concepts: Dialectic between Individual and Collective

This section traces the genealogy of happiness in Western philosophy, examining how ethical focus shifts between “individual” and “collective (community/society)” through historical development (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Genealogy of western conceptions of happiness.

Key Thinkers	Maxim	Key Question & Answer	Perspective (Standpoint)	Historical Context & Purpose
Aristotle	Man is by nature a rational animal (<i>Politics</i>)	Why must humans cultivate reason and virtue? → To actualize our unique function (ergon) by exercising reason and practicing virtue (the Golden Mean), thereby achieving true happiness (eudaimonia). Teleological and context-dependent: requires practical wisdom (phronesis) to discern the mean.	The Individual (with the Community/Politics as the assumed framework)	The Collapse of the Polis (City-State) An era pursuing “arete” (virtue/excellence): “How can an individual live the best life together with the community?”
Rousseau	Man is born free (<i>The Social Contract</i>)	Why are humans unfree? → Private property and the deceit of social contracts caused the fall from the state of nature (inequality). True freedom requires a new contract where individuals submit private interests to the General Will. Return to nature + construction of a new “Social Contract”.	The Individual (as the naturally free being)	Enlightenment & Contradictions of Feudalism (Pre-French Revolution) A society where “the unnaturalness of civilization” and “inequality of wealth” ran rampant. Attempting to reconstruct legitimate political power (popular sovereignty) based on the premise that “humans are naturally free.”
Kant	Act autonomously (<i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>)	Why is lying forbidden? → Because Reason (the Moral Law) prohibits it. It must be viewed absolutely, regardless of consequences. “Absolute Moral Law”. Rigid, yet protects individual rights absolutely.	The Individual (as a rational being capable of universal law)	Collapse of Feudal Order & Terror of Revolution An era building a wall of “Principle (Absoluteness)” against the terror where “morality became relative and violence ran rampant under the guise of righteousness.”
Bentham & Mill	The greatest happiness for the greatest number (<i>The Principles of Morals and Legislation</i>)	Why is individual sacrifice sometimes unavoidable? → If total social happiness (utility) is maximized, the misfortune of the few is accepted as a “computational cost.” Emotions or rights are secondary to “numbers (hedonic calculus).” Risk of tolerating the sacrifice of the minority.	The Collective (The Whole) (Aggregation of individuals)	Industrial Revolution & Age of Rationalism An era pursuing “pragmatism”: designing society based on “results (efficiency & maximization of happiness)” rather than abstract principles.
Nussbaum	Affirm vulnerability (<i>The Capabilities Approach</i>)	Why does the individual suffer? → Because the individual is fragile, it is precisely within “connections” with others and the community that human dignity and happiness are found. Affirming human emotion and vulnerability.	The Individual within the Collective (In relational connection)	Globalization & Era of Polarization An era re-evaluating “human fragility” and “emotion” that cold rationality or absolutism cannot save, reviving Aristotle’s virtue ethics for the modern world.

Note: This table summarizes predominant intellectual tendencies in Western happiness philosophy from Aristotle to Nussbaum, based on the ideal-type methodology outlined in Section 2. Thinkers are presented along a historical trajectory, though many (e.g., Rousseau’s general will, Kant’s rational agreement) contain elements that resist pure individualist readings. See Sections 3.1 through 3.5 for detailed analysis.

3.1. Aristotle: Individual within the Whole

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle establishes the Western discussion of happiness (*eudaimonia*). As the title indicates, Western conceptualization of happiness begins from an ethical perspective. Happiness is defined not as pleasure or wealth but as “activity of soul in accordance with virtue” (Aristotle, 1999). The core of this conception lies in “teleology.” Humans possess a unique function distinguishing them from other animals—“reason (*logos*).” Aristotle believed that only by exercising reason and cultivating virtue (*arete*) can humans live truly human lives. Here, autonomous moral judgment is valued by individuals, with a focus on individual self-realization. However, this “self” was positioned within a larger whole (*polis*/community), not regarded as an isolated existence. This resembles the ancient Japanese worldview, but closer examination reveals it is fundamentally grounded in the individual exercising reason, not in the collective/*polis* itself.

3.2. Rousseau: Interiority, Natural Sentiment, Political Community

In the mid-18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau showed complex, multilayered perspectives, avoiding simple categorization. He criticized “artificial things” and “inequality” brought by civilization, proposing a return to “natural sentiments” and “inner conscience” (Rousseau, 1994). For Rousseau, one dimension of happiness lay in living sincerely according to genuine emotions unpolluted by social comparison and vanity. This deepening of interiority represents an important shift from Aristotelian “virtue within community,” becoming a crucial precursor to the Kantian autonomous moral subject.

However, this characterization captures only one aspect of Rousseau’s thought. Equally central to his political philosophy is the concept of general will. In the *Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau argues that a properly constituted political community, guided by the general will, transforms natural freedom into civil and moral freedom. Individuals acquire true freedom only as citizens, not in isolated states. Thus, Rousseau’s description does not represent direct movement toward “purely internal individualism” but rather tension between interiority and political belonging, anticipating the dilemma this study seeks to resolve.

For purposes of this genealogy, Rousseau remains important because his thought embodies this tension: happiness standards begin turning inward (toward natural sentiments and conscience) yet remain embedded in robust political community theory. Subsequent narrowing of Rousseau, particularly by Kant, represents a shift toward an autonomy concept separated from social relations, contributing to what this study identifies as the cause of modern fragmentation.

3.3. Kant: Autonomous Individual

Why include Kant in the happiness genealogy? Kant did not develop happiness theory in Aristotelian or utilitarian senses. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he clearly distinguished morality from the pursuit of happiness.

However, Kant is included in this genealogy because his concept of autonomy deeply reconstructs the conditions under which happiness is pursued and contemporary self-understanding. By establishing autonomously self-legislating, irreducibly autonomous moral subjects, Kant severed conceptual links between virtue and community that Aristotle had established. Even if Kant himself understood autonomy as “rational agreement” with others, selective reception and simplification in modernity contributed to a sovereign, self-sufficient self-concept termed “encumbered self” (Sandel, 1982). This study treats Kant not as a happiness theorist but as a pivot figure whose autonomy concept reconfigured the conceptual space where happiness is understood.

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant presents the categorical imperative. The core principle is “always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, never merely as means but always at the same time as end” (Kant, 2012). Kant believed morality stems neither from external sources nor from emotion but from “autonomy”—establishing and following one’s own law. For example, when asked about a friend’s hiding place, one must not lie regardless of consequences, because lying itself violates moral law. Thus, Kant established the dignity of personal moral agency as absolute.

Importantly, Kant conceived moral law as “rational agreement” with others, strongly advocating that we treat others as ends in themselves. This study also notes that the selective reception of Kant’s autonomy principle, abstracted from its relational foundation, contributed to the emphasis on the self-isolation tendency criticized in this paper.

3.4. Bentham and Mill: Shift toward Collective Utility

Against Kant’s absolute morality, utilitarianism (consequentialism) questioned its rigidity and neglect of consequences. Historical experience behind this included the French Revolution (1789) and the subsequent Reign of Terror. Reflection on idealism in absolute morality arose from the lesson “ideals of liberty and equality caused disasters.” Jeremy Bentham, appearing during the 19th-century Industrial Revolution, proposed the “principle of greatest happiness.” This held “if total happiness of the entire society is maximized, individual sacrifice becomes unavoidable.” John Stuart Mill later argued that qualitative differences exist in happiness (qualities of pleasure) (Mill, 2001).

Utilitarianism shifted the judgment standard from “individual reason and interiority” to “collective usefulness (total happiness) of the whole society,” establishing an ethical foundation continuing from contemporary Western society to the present. Here, Western happiness views shifted again from individual toward “collective (whole society),” but this represented collective as accumulation of calculable usefulness rather than Aristotle’s “virtue-based community.”

3.5. Nussbaum: Re-Embedding the Individual within Relations

In the late 20th to early 21st century, Martha C. Nussbaum brought new perspec-

tives, pointing out the limitations of happiness views that rely purely on rationalism or autonomy. In *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) and *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), she argued humans are beings possessing “vulnerability”—becoming ill, aging, and depending on others (Nussbaum, 2001, 2004). Nussbaum pointed out that the pursuit of self-sufficiency, ignoring the human condition (vulnerability) and emotions, produces social isolation and alienation from the environment. She reinterpreted Aristotelian “virtue” for modern times, proposing a “capabilities approach,” arguing that happiness is realized only within relationships with others and social context.

Nussbaum’s identification of “vulnerability” and reevaluation of “relationality” show similarities with *wa* concept advocated by ancient Japan, providing suggestive insights for constructing the integrated framework proposed in this study.

Supplement Note: On Spinoza, though not referenced in this study, Baruch de Spinoza’s (1632-1677) philosophy occupies an interesting position. Spinoza taught the identity of nature and God, holding the view that humans are part of nature. This contains elements approximating ancient Japanese worldviews but was treated as heterodox within Western rationalist tradition, expelled during lifetime, and re-evaluated decades after death (Nagel, 2016). This fact itself suggests a historical background showing that the West came to prioritize autonomous, individual, analytical perspectives. That Spinoza shared elements with ancient Japanese worldviews remains intriguing and is left as a topic for future research.

4. Japanese Happiness Concepts

4.1. Ancient Japanese Happiness Concepts: Harmony and Tranquility

Whereas Western individualist frameworks consider the “interiority of autonomous individual” as the core of happiness, the Jōmon period (10,000 BCE - 300 BCE) demonstrates that ancient Japanese happiness was based on “*wa*” with others, the natural world, and spirits (“*kami*”).

Archaeological Insights into Social Harmony:

Evidence from the Jōmon period indicates cooperative social structures with limited class stratification and artifacts that suggest a low prevalence of weapons specifically designed for warfare or intergroup violence. While the scarcity of such weaponry supports the view of a society with relatively low levels of organized conflict, it can be said that the incomplete nature of the archaeological record precludes the complete exclusion of the possibility of localized disputes or smaller-scale confrontations. This period represents a domain of frictionless harmony where individuals existed within interdependent relational networks rather than isolated substances. Archaeological record supports the claim that ancient Japan, particularly the Jōmon period, embodied collective well-being without the alienation characteristic of later class societies.

As established in Section 2 - 3, we distinguish the Jōmon period from subsequent periods based on archaeological evidence and text documentation.

Textual Foundation Complementing Archaeological Record:

While the Jōmon period left no written records, later texts preserve worldviews consistent with relational ontology:

- **Seventeen-Article Constitution (604 CE):** Traditionally attributed to Crown Prince Shōtoku, declaring “*wa* is to be prized.”
- **Kojiki (712 CE) and Nihon Shoki (720 CE):** Demonstrate cosmic vision where humans, kami, and nature are not sharply distinguished but ontologically continuous. Kagawa (1997) characterizes this worldview as “sacred awe toward natural phenomena themselves.”
- **Manyōshū (approximately 759 CE):** Numerous poems express awe toward natural landscapes and seasonal cycles, reflecting a holistic consciousness described by Nishida (1921) as “self not separated from world.”

Within this framework, happiness resided in an experiencing state called *yasuragi*, where individuals harmonized with kami, nature, or community (village). *Yasuragi* referred not simply to quiet or rest but to a mental satisfaction state where inner tranquility aligned with outer environmental harmony.

Important Distinction: Crucial to recognize that claims of “frictionless harmony in ancient Japan” apply specifically to the Jōmon period, supported by archaeological evidence. We acknowledge that subsequent periods (Yayoi, Kofun, Nara, Heian) developed class structures, gender hierarchization, and power asymmetries, complicating the original relational ontology. *wa* expressed in elite texts from the Nara period, was simultaneously an ethical ideal and an ideology, potentially reinforcing vertical authority structures.

This study borrows *wa* concept primarily from the Jōmon archaeological record as a philosophical resource for understanding ontological happiness, using subsequent texts as supplementary evidence of preserved worldviews amid social transformation. Relationship between happiness and hierarchical social structures—specifically how original Jōmon relational harmony changed through the emergence of class society in later periods—remains a topic for future research (See Section 4.2).

4.2. Transformation of *wa* and Distortions of Modernization

Ancient Japanese *wa* has transformed into contemporary Japan. This section examines notable transformations while guarding against single-cause explanations.

Distinction between Jōmon Harmony and Subsequent Institutional *wa*:

As clarified in Section 4.1, claims of frictionless harmony apply to a specific Jōmon period, as supported by archaeological evidence. Subsequent periods introduced hierarchical structures, transforming the original relational ontology. Therefore, we distinguish:

- Jōmon-style *wa*: Non-hierarchical, frictionless collective harmony (archaeological evidence)
- Subsequent institutional *wa*: *wa* expressed within class structures (textual documents)

Multicausality in Social Fragmentation:

Postwar Japanese society developed in part on democratic capitalism imported from the West, alongside persistent indigenous institutional structures. Contemporary social challenges, recognized as crisis situations like *hikikomori* (socially withdrawn) and *kodokushi* (lonely deaths), cannot be attributed solely to the permeation of Western individualism when causality is investigated. As Nakane (1967) herself demonstrated, these pathologies are deeply rooted in Japanese “vertical society” dynamics, entirely different from horizontal Jōmon-period society, where class consciousness was low and individuals absorbed into the natural environment.

It can be said that ancient *wa* leading to controlling social structures resulted in excessive structural conformity, institutional rigidity, and erosion of intermediate social bonds between family and workplace. This distortion reflects what Nakane (1967) identified as the dominance of “vertical” group dynamics, where loyalty to the collective hierarchy often supersedes genuine horizontal interpersonal connections, thereby hollowing out the original relational essence of *wa*. Simultaneously, globalized late capitalism, neoliberal labor market reforms, and decline of lifetime employment destroyed conventional social safety nets beyond a simple East-West binary (Osawa, Kim, & Kingston, 2013).

Therefore, this study’s claim is not that Western individualism alone caused these crises, but rather that the adoption of Western-originated institutional models presupposing individual autonomy and economic rationality interacted with preceding vertical social structures, producing unique atomization. In this interaction, both thinning of relational consciousness (*wa*) and persistence of conformity pressure contributed to the erosion of former intermediate community connections protecting individuals from isolation.

Similarly, environmental burden cannot be reduced to a single cultural cause. Under globally shared industrial economic structures, capitalist logic prioritizing economic efficiency led to increased environmental burden in both Western and Japanese institutional contexts (Oda, 2018). This phenomenon reflects industrial economic structures developing globally, constituting a common challenge worldwide, not limited to Japan.

Reevaluation of Relational Values:

Entering the 21st century, awareness of these intersecting crises led to a reevaluation of *wa* concept and associated relational values. Miura (2020) identified a shift from the logic of “ownership” and “competition” toward “sharing” and “co-creation” in contemporary Japanese enterprises and society. This movement indicates Japanese society beginning to revalue “connection with others” and “consideration for the whole” as a reaction to both the impasse of Western individualism and its own conformity-driven institutional rigidity. This tendency resonates with Nussbaum’s reconsideration of human relationships and the capabilities approach in contemporary society, suggesting both traditions are experiencing parallel returns to relational thinking.

5. Comparative Analysis and Implications for Contemporary Society: Integration of Autonomy and Harmony

5.1. Comparison of Thinking Structures

To organize this study's arguments, fundamental differences underlying the philosophical and cognitive foundations of Western and Japanese thought must be addressed. Western scholarly tradition, represented by Aristotle's systematization of reason, has been characterized by an "analytic" approach dividing phenomena and examining constituent components (Nisbett et al., 2001). Essential for logical development, this produced a dominant viewpoint seeing the world as "an accumulation of individual entities."

In contrast, premodern Japanese thinking structures were characterized by a "holistic" approach emphasizing relationships and contexts between things rather than dividing and separating phenomena, grasping wholes as integrated (Nishida, 1921; Nakane, 1967). This difference affects the foundations of happiness and ethics as well. While the West pursues "individual autonomy" and "internal virtue," Japan tended to emphasize "harmony within relationships" and "a sense of unity with the whole." Therefore, the highly developed differentiation of analytic academic disciplines seen in the West developed differently in Japan within different contexts.

Emphasizing this structural difference through ideal types should not be read as claims about the totality of either tradition. Western analytic mode coexisted with integrative philosophical currents (Hegel, Heidegger, phenomenology, etc.), while Japanese integrative orientation coexists with analytic scholarship, especially since the Meiji period.

Comparative analysis illuminates dominant tendencies producing cumulative institutional effects, not exclusive essential claims about civilizations.

5.2. Integration of "Autonomy" and "Harmony"

The genealogy of Western happiness concepts examined in Section 3 shows a trajectory advancing from Aristotelian "virtue within community" through Rousseau and Kant toward the deepening of "personal interiority and autonomy," culminating in utilitarian "utility calculation." Kant's "autonomy" concept proves particularly significant. Originally premised on "rational agreement" with others, it became, in contemporary society, misunderstood and excessively emphasized as "complete independence from others" or "retreat into interiority." This runaway "absolute autonomy" fostered self-concepts separated from social relations, thereby becoming the ideological basis for the spread of "isolation" in modern society (Sandel, 1982; MacIntyre, 2007).

In contrast, the ancient Japanese *wa* perspective examined in Section 4 assumes individuals do not exist as independent substances separated from others and the natural environment, but rather exist "within relationships themselves" (Nishida, 1921). This integrated structure, where individuals are contained within collective and collective is expressed through individuals, offers a powerful counter-axis to

the Western trajectory toward isolation. However, as discussed in Section 4.2, ancient *wa* cannot be transplanted as-is to today; historical transformations produced structural problems like conformity pressure potentially erasing individuality and diversity (Hamaguchi, 1989; Nakane, 1967).

Therefore, the challenge raised by this study is constructing a new model inheriting the benefits of both Western “autonomy” and ancient Japanese *wa* while overcoming structural problems of each. We propose an approach that maintains Western “individual autonomy and exercise of reason (Aristotelian eudaimonia)” as a foundational principle while redirecting its manifestation toward “harmony with others and environment (Japanese *wa*).” In this framework, individual autonomy is redefined as an indispensable precondition for achieving “co-creative relationships” that realize harmony with others and the environment, rather than as a path toward isolation (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis of Western, Japanese, and integrated happiness frameworks.

Comparison Item	Western Approach	Ancient Japanese Approach	Integrated Perspective Proposed by This Study
Core Values	Individual autonomy, reason, self-sufficiency	Harmony (<i>wa</i>), collective cohesion, interdependence	Relational Autonomy: Autonomy is the foundation for meaningful relationships, not independence from them.
Definition of Happiness	Exercise of individual virtue and reason (Eudaimonia); Self-actualization	Sense of oneness with others/nature; Yasuragi (tranquility through harmony)	Balanced Flourishing: Happiness as the realization of individual potential <i>within</i> supportive, harmonious relationships and a healthy environment.
Relationship with Others	Contractual, often adversarial or external; “Others” as means or ends	Indispensable internal existence; “Others” as part of the self; Vertical/Horizontal dynamics	Dynamic Equilibrium: Relationships are co-creative spaces where differences are respected, avoiding both isolation and forced conformity.
Relationship with Environment	External object of exploitation or management; Nature as resource	Sacred continuity; Humans as part of nature (Animism); Ecological embeddedness	Ecological Embeddedness: Well-being is constitutively linked to environmental health; economic utility is constrained by ecological limits.
Response to Modern Crises	Risks of isolation, anomie, and environmental neglect due to excessive individualism	Risks of conformity, suppression of diversity, and erosion of individual rights	Reflective Self-Correction: A framework that actively balances individual rights with collective responsibility, using 5 operational principles to avoid extremes.
Operational Principles	<i>Implicit:</i> Utilitarian calculation, legal rights	<i>Implicit:</i> Social duty, group loyalty	Explicit: 1. Relational Autonomy 2. Harmony as Dynamic Equilibrium 3. Ecological Embeddedness 4. Virtue as Relational Practice 5. Reflective Self-Correction

Note: The five operational principles underlying this integrated perspective are elaborated in detail in Section 5.3.

5.3. Operational Principles of Integrated Framework

The above integrated framework can be concretized through five operational prin-

ciples for balancing conflicts between autonomy, social obligation, diversity, and ecological responsibility:

Principle 1: Relational Autonomy. Individual autonomy is recognized as a necessary precondition for flourishing but redefined as relational rather than atomistic. Autonomy is the capacity to participate meaningfully in relationships while exercising rational moral judgment, not independence from others. When autonomy and social obligations conflict, this framework asks whether obligations enhance or impair an individual's genuine capacity for relational participation. Obligations suppressing individual agency (for example, mandatory conformity) violate relational autonomy, while obligations enabling mutual prosperity (for example, civic responsibilities) constitute its achievement.

Principle 2: Harmony as Dynamic Equilibrium Rather Than Uniformity. Following the critical distinctions drawn in Section 4.1, ancient Japanese *wa* is reinterpreted not as frictionless agreement or forced homogeneity, but as a dynamic equilibrium that accepts differences within a shared relational fabric. This principle explicitly rejects the use of *wa* to suppress diversity. When harmony and diversity conflict, this framework prioritizes inclusive forms of harmony incorporating multiple perspectives over forms requiring assimilation.

Principle 3: Ecological Embeddedness. Human well-being stands in a constitutive relation with the health of the natural environment. When economic usefulness (Bentham-Mill) and ecological sustainability conflict, this framework applies prudential constraints: short-term usefulness gains systematically damaging ecological relations upon which long-term prosperity depends are considered self-defeating. This principle borrows from Western cosmological natural understanding and reinterprets it not for nostalgic regression but for contemporary ecological reality.

Principle 4: Virtue as Practice Within Relationships. Following Aristotle and Nussbaum, exercise of virtue (*arete*) is essential but understood as practiced within relational contexts rather than in isolation. Capabilities—both individual and collective—are realized through the intersection of individual agency and enabling social/ecological conditions. When personal virtues and relational conditions conflict (for example, an autonomous agent trapped in destructive relationships), this framework directs attention not only to individuals but toward repairing relational environments.

Principle 5: Reflective Self-Correction. Both Western and Japanese traditions carry risk of distortion—individualism toward isolation, *wa* toward coercion. This framework incorporates reflective principles: any application of these principles is evaluated against tendencies toward either extreme and adjusted accordingly.

These principles are provided not as deterministic rules but evaluative criteria designed to guide deliberation in concrete cases such as education policy, community design, and environmental governance.

6. Conclusion

This essay redefined the concept of “happiness” in the modern era and constructed

an integrated framework through a dialogue between Western philosophy and ancient Japanese thought. The genealogy of Western happiness views, from Aristotelian “virtue within community” to modern utilitarianism, reveals a trajectory of deepening individual interiority and eventual isolation. This trajectory, rooted in Western analytic modes of thinking that separate individuals from wholes, was identified as the source of pervasive social fragmentation today.

In contrast, the ancient Japanese *wa* concept, placing particular emphasis on Jōmon archaeological records, positions itself as existing within relationships themselves rather than as isolated substances. Its integrated cognitive structure, based on “indivisible unity” of individual and collective, offers a powerful correction to Western division tendencies. However, Japan’s modernization led to the erosion of this perspective, producing the same isolation crisis that the West is currently facing.

The integrated framework proposed in this study synthesizes these traditions. As Western tradition rediscovers its Aristotelian origins within a community resonating with Japanese thought’s “indivisible unity,” it regenerates the lost wisdom of the “individual within relationships.” This synthesis provides an ontological foundation for happiness that transcends subjective satisfaction, realizing the self through harmonious coexistence with others and the environment.

Moving forward, this redefined happiness view demands a paradigm shift from “analysis and division” toward “integration and relationship.” It urges building beyond fragmented “well-being” and quantitative indicator concepts, standing upon universal foundations for human flourishing. This integrated approach is expected to serve as an important compass for constructing new civilization models that create more sustainable and inclusive worlds in education, policy, and social structures.

Author Contributions

Chiho Yoshimoto: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing—Original Draft, Investigation, Data Curation, and Writing—Review & Editing. **Uri Stav:** Writing—Review & Editing and Project Administration. **Yohei Tanaka:** Supervision, Conceptualization, and Writing—Review & Editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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