

FROM NEED SATISFACTION TO ONTOLOGICAL FULFILMENT: RECONSTRUCTING HUMAN MOTIVATION THROUGH MASLOW AND IGBO PERSONHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This research critically re-examines dominant psychological explanations of human motivation by questioning whether need satisfaction sufficiently accounts for human fulfilment. While Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs remains influential in explaining motivation and personal growth, it is primarily psychological and individualistic, and therefore limited in addressing fulfilment as an ontological condition of being human. The study employs conceptual analysis, critical reconstruction, and comparative hermeneutics to engage Maslow's hierarchy of needs in dialogue with the Igbo ontology of personhood, focusing on the concepts of *mmadu* (person), *onwe* (selfhood), *chi* (personal destiny), and communal fulfilment. The analysis reveals a fundamental difference: Maslow interprets human striving as progressive satisfaction of hierarchical needs, whereas Igbo philosophy conceives fulfilment as ontological alignment involving destiny, moral becoming, relational existence, and communal recognition. The research argues that fulfilment transcends psychological satisfaction and is better understood as the realization of one's being within a moral and communal order. It therefore proposes a shift from a purely need-based framework to an ontological model of fulfilment, offering a culturally grounded reconstruction that broadens contemporary discussions in philosophical anthropology and humanistic psychology.

Keywords: Maslow's Theory of Needs, Human Motivation, Human Fulfilment, Ontological Fulfilment; Igbo Personhood; Self-actualization

INTRODUCTION

The question of what truly fulfils the human person has long occupied psychology and philosophy, particularly in modern theories of human motivation. Within psychological literature, fulfilment is commonly explained through the satisfaction of human needs, a perspective most influentially articulated in Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs presents human behaviour as driven by a progression from basic physiological and safety needs to higher psychological needs, culminating in self-actualization and, in later formulations, self-transcendence (Maslow, 1943; Kaur, 2013). This framework has shaped decades of research and practice in psychology, education, management, development studies, and social policy, largely because it offers a coherent account of *why* human beings strive and *how* motivation unfolds. Later

revisions of Maslow's theory acknowledge the importance of self-transcendence but retain a predominantly psychological orientation (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Venter, 2012).

However, as several critical and reconstructive studies within the Maslowian tradition have shown, Maslow's theory functions primarily as a psychological model of motivation, not as an ontological account of fulfilment (Reid-Cunningham, 2008). The hierarchy explains human striving in terms of need satisfaction, yet it remains largely silent on the deeper question of what it means *to be fulfilled as a person*. Even when Maslow extends the hierarchy to include self-transcendence, fulfilment is still treated as an internal psychological state achieved through individual growth and experiential satisfaction rather than as a condition grounded in the being of the human person (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Consequently, fulfilment in Maslow's framework remains descriptive and motivational, not ontological.

This limitation has become more evident in contemporary critiques and revisions of Maslow's theory. Studies that propose dynamic, systemic, or non-hierarchical models of human needs acknowledge that need satisfaction does not always follow a linear progression and that higher needs may coexist with unmet lower needs (Ghaleb, 2024; Yu, 2026). While such revisions improve the explanatory flexibility of Maslow's model, they do not fundamentally resolve the underlying problem: fulfilment is still reduced to the management and satisfaction of needs rather than understood as a deeper mode of human existence. Thus, even revised Maslowian frameworks continue to operate within the logic of need satisfaction, leaving the ontological dimension of fulfilment under-theorized.

In contrast, Igbo philosophy approaches the human person from an ontological rather than purely motivational standpoint. Within Igbo ontology, the human person (*mmadu*) is not defined primarily by psychological drives or satisfied needs but by metaphysical constitution involving selfhood (*onwe*), life-soul (*mkpuruobi*), destiny (*chi*), moral becoming, and communal recognition (Okoro, 2025). Fulfilment, from this perspective, is not merely the endpoint of motivated striving but an ontological condition arising from the proper alignment of being, destiny, moral responsibility, and relational existence. Unlike Maslow's model, which treats fulfilment as an individual psychological achievement, Igbo thought situates fulfilment within a broader metaphysical and communal horizon.

The problem this research addresses, therefore, is the inadequacy of need satisfaction as a comprehensive explanation of human fulfilment. While Maslow's theory successfully explains motivation, it does not account for fulfilment as an ontological reality of the human person. By placing Maslow's motivational framework in critical dialogue with Igbo ontology of personhood, this research seeks to reconstruct human motivation beyond psychological need satisfaction towards the concept of ontological fulfilment. Indigenous metaphysical perspectives reveal deeper dimensions of human fulfilment beyond experiential satisfaction (Okigbo, Mmoneke, & Nnoruka, 2025). Such a reconstruction not only exposes the philosophical limits of Maslow's theory but also demonstrates how Igbo philosophy contributes a theory-generative alternative capable of enriching contemporary discussions on human motivation and fulfilment.

MASLOW'S THEORY OF HUMAN MOTIVATION AND THE LOGIC OF NEED SATISFACTION

Maslow's theory of human motivation is fundamentally organized around the principle of *need satisfaction*. In his original formulation, human behaviour is explained as a response to internal deficits that generate motivation until they are sufficiently satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Needs are arranged in a hierarchy beginning with physiological requirements and progressing through safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. The underlying assumption is that lower needs demand priority and must be reasonably gratified before higher needs can exert motivational force. Within this framework, human development is interpreted as a gradual movement from deficiency toward growth, driven by the satisfaction of increasingly complex needs.

Central to this model is the distinction between *deficiency needs* and *growth needs*. Deficiency needs arise from deprivation and exert pressure on the individual until they are met, whereas growth needs (particularly self-actualization) are oriented towards realizing inherent human potentials (Noltmeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012). Maslow's own writings emphasize that unmet deficiency needs dominate consciousness and behaviour, while satisfied needs recede in motivational power. Fulfilment, therefore, is implicitly tied to the progressive resolution of internal lack. Even when higher needs emerge, they are conceived as responses to psychological conditions generated by earlier satisfactions. Even at its highest level, Maslow's framework remains centered on individual experiential achievement (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Subsequent analyses of Maslow's hierarchy clarify that the theory operates primarily at the level of *psychological motivation rather than metaphysical explanation*. Studies applying and critiquing the hierarchy point out that Maslow was concerned with describing *how* motivation functions, not with defining the ontological nature of the human person (Kaur 2013; Reid-Cunningham, 2008). Consequently, fulfilment within this model is understood as a psychological outcome- an internal state of satisfaction, balance, or growth- rather than as a condition grounded in being. The human person appears as a motivational system whose fulfilment depends on the effective management and satisfaction of needs.

Later developments in Maslow's thought, particularly the introduction of *self-transcendence*, attempt to move beyond the individualistic orientation of early self-actualization. In these later writings, fulfilment involves going beyond the self toward higher values, service, or peak experiences (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). However, even in this expanded framework, self-transcendence remains conceptually dependent on need satisfaction. It is presented as a higher motivational state that emerges after the fulfilment of more basic needs, rather than as an ontological orientation intrinsic to the human person. Thus, the logic of motivation remains continuous: *needs generate striving, satisfaction resolves tension, and fulfilment is achieved through psychological progression*.

Critical reconstructions of Maslow's hierarchy further demonstrate the persistence of this logic. Dynamic and non-hierarchical revisions acknowledge that needs may overlap, recur, or coexist, challenging the rigid pyramid structure (Ghaleb, 2024). Nevertheless, these revisions retain the core assumption that human motivation (and by extension fulfilment) is fundamentally a matter of need satisfaction. Whether linear or dynamic, hierarchical or systemic, the Maslowian tradition

continues to conceptualize *fulfilment as the successful negotiation of needs rather than as an ontological condition of personhood*.

This emphasis on *need satisfaction* constitutes both the strength and the limitation of Maslow's theory. While it provides a powerful explanatory account of human striving, it reduces fulfilment to a psychological endpoint within the motivational process. The theory explains *why* humans strive but does not sufficiently address *what it means to be fulfilled as a person*. This unresolved tension between motivation and fulfilment sets the stage for a critical reconstruction of Maslow's framework- one that moves beyond the logic of need satisfaction toward an ontological understanding of fulfilment. It is at this juncture that Igbo philosophy of personhood becomes philosophically significant, offering resources for re-conceiving *fulfilment not merely as satisfied need, but as fulfilled being*.

THE LIMITS OF NEED SATISFACTION AND THE QUESTION OF FULFILMENT

While Maslow's theory of human motivation offers a coherent account of why human beings strive, its explanatory power weakens when the concept of fulfilment is examined more closely. Within the Maslowian framework, fulfilment is implicitly equated with the satisfaction of needs and the attainment of higher motivational states such as self-actualization or self-transcendence. However, several critical analyses of the theory point out that the satisfaction of needs does not necessarily result in a stable or comprehensive condition of fulfilment (Reid-Cunningham, 2008). The repeated emergence of unmet needs, the recurrence of motivational tension, and the contextual variability of human satisfaction all suggest that fulfilment cannot be adequately explained as the endpoint of need satisfaction.

Empirical and theoretical studies of Maslow's hierarchy further demonstrate that individuals may experience a sense of fulfilment despite the absence of complete need satisfaction, just as they may experience dissatisfaction even after achieving higher-level needs (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Research on deficiency and growth needs reveals that these categories frequently overlap and interact rather than operate in a strict sequence. As a result, fulfilment appears less as a final state achieved through linear progression and more as a fluctuating experience shaped by psychological, social, and contextual factors. This undermines the assumption that fulfilment naturally follows from the resolution of internal deficits.

Critiques of Maslow's hierarchy also highlight its heavy reliance on *psychological interiority*. Fulfilment is treated as an internal state of satisfaction, balance, or peak experience, largely detached from broader questions of meaning, destiny, or ontological grounding (Buss, 1979). Even Maslow's later emphasis on self-transcendence, while expanding the scope of motivation beyond the ego, remains embedded within a psychological framework. Self-transcendence is still conceived as a motivational outcome that emerges after certain needs are met, rather than as a fundamental orientation of human existence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Consequently, fulfilment remains tied to subjective experience rather than to the being of the person.

Attempts to revise Maslow's model (through dynamic, systemic, or non-hierarchical approaches) acknowledge many of these limitations. Scholars proposing alternative visual representations or flexible hierarchies argue that human needs are better understood as interacting systems rather than

fixed levels (Ghaleb, 2024). Yet even these revisions retain the core logic of need satisfaction. Fulfilment continues to be explained in terms of how effectively individuals navigate and satisfy their needs, not in terms of what it means to exist as a fulfilled person. The problem, therefore, is not merely the structure of the hierarchy but the conceptual reduction of fulfilment to motivation.

This reduction becomes more evident when Maslow's theory is applied beyond its original cultural and philosophical context. Studies in housing, economics, education, and refugee empowerment demonstrate that meeting basic and psychological needs does not automatically produce a sense of fulfilment or well-being (Baqutayan, Ariffin, & Raji, 2015). In many cases, individuals whose needs are materially satisfied continue to experience alienation, meaninglessness, or existential dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that fulfilment involves dimensions that exceed psychological motivation and cannot be captured solely through need-based explanations.

The foregoing analysis reveals a conceptual gap at the heart of Maslow's theory: while it explains motivation effectively, it does not account for fulfilment as a durable and comprehensive condition of human existence. Fulfilment appears as a psychological by-product of satisfied needs rather than as a deeper state grounded in the nature of the human person. This gap raises a fundamental philosophical question: *what kind of fulfilment is achieved when needs are satisfied, and what kind remains unaccounted for?* Addressing this question requires moving beyond the logic of need satisfaction toward a framework capable of explaining fulfilment at the level of being. It is this unresolved question that opens the space for an ontological reconstruction of fulfilment- one that will be developed through Igbo philosophy of personhood.

ONTOLOGICAL FULFILMENT IN IGBO PERSONHOOD

Igbo philosophy approaches fulfilment not as the outcome of satisfied needs but as a condition rooted in the *being of the human person*. Unlike psychological models that explain fulfilment in terms of internal states or motivational achievements, Igbo ontology grounds fulfilment in the metaphysical constitution of the person. Within this framework, fulfilment is understood as the proper alignment of selfhood, destiny, moral becoming, and communal recognition, rather than as the resolution of psychological deficits. This ontological orientation offers a fundamentally different account of what it means to be fulfilled as a human being. In Igbo metaphysics, fulfilment is inseparable from moral alignment and metaphysical harmony (Okigbo & Iloanya, 2025).

Central to this conception is the idea of *mmadu* as an ontological category. Studies on Igbo ontology emphasize that *mmadu* denotes the total reality of the human person, encompassing physical, spiritual, moral, and relational dimensions (Okoro, 2025). Personhood is not something attained through achievement or success but is given as a metaphysical fact of existence. Consequently, fulfilment cannot be reduced to what the person acquires or satisfies; it concerns how the person *exists* and *becomes* within the structure of being. Fulfilment, in this sense, is not episodic or subjective but ontological and enduring.

The concept of *onwe* further deepens this understanding of fulfilment. *Onwe* refers to the metaphysical core of selfhood that individuates the person and grounds personal identity. Okpalike's analysis of Igbo self-personhood demonstrates that *onwe* is not socially constructed but ontologically prior to communal interaction (Okpalike, 2020). Because fulfilment presupposes

a stable self that can realize meaning, destiny, and responsibility, *onwe* provides the ontological anchor for fulfilment. A person is fulfilled not merely by satisfying needs but by actualizing the integrity of the self within the horizon of existence.

Ontological fulfilment in Igbo thought is also inseparable from the concept of *chi*, understood as personal destiny or life principle. Igbo philosophical studies consistently interpret *chi* as a metaphysical determinant that individualizes the person and situates life within a meaningful trajectory (Nwobi & Nnaji, 2021). Fulfilment, therefore, involves living in harmony with one's *chi*, not merely achieving external success or internal satisfaction. Importantly, *chi* does not negate human agency; rather, fulfilment emerges through the dynamic interaction between destiny, effort, moral choice, and responsibility. This contrasts sharply with Maslowian fulfilment, which remains largely internal and self-referential.

Moral becoming plays a crucial role in ontological fulfilment, but it does not constitute personhood itself. In Igbo philosophy, moral excellence is understood as the proper expression of an already constituted person. Isaac's analysis of Igbo personhood shows that moral failure does not negate personhood, nor does moral success automatically guarantee fulfilment (Isaac, 2022). Fulfilment is instead tied to the integration of moral responsibility with ontological identity. Thus, ontological fulfilment avoids the reductionism found in both psychological satisfaction models and normative moralism.

Communal recognition further completes the structure of fulfilment without collapsing it into social approval. Igbo philosophy recognizes the community as the space in which personhood is expressed and affirmed, but not as the source of personal existence. Studies of Igbo social order and personhood emphasize that the community acknowledges fulfilment when an individual lives in harmony with selfhood, destiny, and moral responsibility (Mbarah & Ezenwankwor, 2023). Communal recognition, therefore, confirms fulfilment; it does not create it. This distinction preserves both individual dignity and communal value.

Taken together, these elements (*mmadu*, *onwe*, *chi*, moral becoming, and communal affirmation) constitute what may be described as *ontological fulfilment* in Igbo philosophy. Fulfilment is not the satisfaction of needs but the realization of being in accordance with metaphysical structure and moral meaning. This account addresses the conceptual gap identified in Maslow's theory by relocating fulfilment from the domain of psychology to that of ontology. In doing so, Igbo personhood provides a philosophically robust model for reconstructing human motivation beyond need satisfaction towards fulfilled being. Communal authorization and ritual discipline sustain this ontological fulfilment within lived experience (Okigbo et al., 2025).

RECONSTRUCTING HUMAN MOTIVATION FROM NEED SATISFACTION TO ONTOLOGICAL FULFILMENT

The foregoing analyses reveal that Maslow's theory of human motivation and Igbo ontology of personhood operate at fundamentally different explanatory levels. Maslow's framework explains *how* motivation functions through the satisfaction of needs, whereas Igbo philosophy explains *what it means to be fulfilled* through ontological alignment. A reconstruction of human motivation,

therefore, requires neither the rejection of Maslow's insights nor their uncritical acceptance, but a philosophical integration that relocates motivation within an ontological horizon of fulfilment.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains valuable as a descriptive account of human striving. The progression from physiological survival to higher aspirations accurately reflects the ways in which deprivation shapes motivation and behaviour. However, the satisfaction of needs does not culminate in a stable or comprehensive state of fulfilment. Instead, need satisfaction functions as a preparatory condition- a necessary but insufficient ground for fulfilled human existence. When interpreted ontologically, Maslow's lower and higher needs may be understood as enabling conditions that allow the person to pursue deeper forms of meaning rather than as ends in themselves.

From the perspective of Igbo ontology, motivation cannot be reduced to internal psychological tension. Human striving is rooted in the structure of being itself. The person (*mmadu*) is ontologically oriented towards fulfilment through the realization of selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral becoming, and communal harmony (Okpalike, 2020). Motivation, therefore, is not merely a response to lack but an expression of ontological orientation toward meaningful existence. This re-conceptualization transforms motivation from a *deficit-driven mechanism into a purposive movement toward fulfilled being*.

Within this reconstructed framework, Maslow's concept of self-actualization can be reinterpreted ontologically. Rather than viewing self-actualization as the psychological realization of inner potentials, it may be understood as the partial expression of *onwe* within the limits of individual experience (Okpalike, 2020). Self-actualization, on its own, remains incomplete because it emphasizes personal growth without fully accounting for destiny, moral obligation, and communal embeddedness. Igbo ontology expands this notion by situating personal realization within a metaphysical and relational context, thereby transforming self-actualization into a dimension of ontological fulfilment rather than its culmination. Religious and spiritual dimensions further reinforce motivation as a relational and moral process (Okigbo & Obielosi, 2025).

Similarly, Maslow's later notion of self-transcendence finds a deeper grounding within Igbo philosophy. While Maslow presents self-transcendence as a higher motivational state emerging after need satisfaction, Igbo thought understands transcendence as intrinsic to personhood through *chi* and communal responsibility (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). The individual does not transcend the self by escaping it but by fulfilling the ontological demands of existence- living in harmony with destiny, moral order, and community. In this sense, transcendence is not an achievement layered upon satisfied needs but a mode of being inherent in fulfilled personhood.

This reconstruction also clarifies the role of moral striving within human motivation. In Maslow's model, morality appears indirectly, often subsumed under esteem, self-actualization, or value-oriented motivation. In contrast, Igbo ontology places moral becoming at the centre of fulfilled existence without making it constitutive of personhood itself (Isaac, 2022). Motivation toward moral excellence is therefore grounded in ontological identity rather than in psychological reward. The individual strives morally not to become a person but because one already *is* a person oriented toward fulfilment.

Communal life further completes this reconstructed account of motivation. Maslow's emphasis on belongingness explains the psychological need for social connection, but Igbo philosophy

understands community as the space in which ontological fulfilment is expressed and affirmed. Studies on Igbo social order show that fulfilment involves recognition by the community when the individual lives in alignment with selfhood, destiny, and moral responsibility (Mbarah & Ezenwankwor, 2023). Motivation, therefore, extends beyond personal satisfaction towards the realization of meaningful existence within a shared moral world.

Reconstructing human motivation from need satisfaction to ontological fulfilment thus yields a more comprehensive framework. Need satisfaction explains the conditions under which human striving becomes possible, but ontological fulfilment explains the purpose toward which such striving is directed. By integrating Maslow's motivational insights with Igbo ontology of personhood, this research advances a conception of motivation that is simultaneously psychological, metaphysical, moral, and communal. Fulfilment, in this reconstructed model, is no longer *the endpoint of satisfied needs but the realization of being in accordance with ontological structure and existential meaning*.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to interrogate the adequacy of need satisfaction as an explanation of human fulfilment and to reconstruct human motivation through a dialogue between Maslow's theory of human needs and Igbo ontology of personhood. It has argued that while Maslow's framework offers a powerful psychological account of human striving, it remains limited in its capacity to explain fulfilment as a comprehensive and enduring condition of human existence. Fulfilment, within the Maslowian tradition, is largely treated as a psychological outcome of satisfied needs and higher motivational states, thereby leaving its ontological foundations insufficiently explored.

Through a critical examination of Maslow's hierarchy and its subsequent revisions, the research demonstrated that need satisfaction functions primarily as an explanatory model of motivation rather than as a theory of fulfilled being. Even when expanded to include self-actualization and self-transcendence, Maslow's model remains embedded within a deficit-satisfaction logic that interprets fulfilment as an internal experiential state. This orientation, while valuable for understanding motivation, does not adequately address the deeper question of what it means to exist meaningfully as a human person. An ontologically grounded account of fulfilment offers a more inclusive framework for understanding human motivation (Okigbo et al., 2025).

Igbo philosophy of personhood provides the ontological resources necessary to address this gap. By grounding fulfilment in the metaphysical constitution of the person (through concepts such as *mmadu*, *onwe*, *chi*, moral becoming, and communal affirmation) Igbo ontology reframes fulfilment as an alignment of being rather than as the culmination of satisfied needs. Fulfilment, in this sense, is not episodic or subjective but ontological, relational, and enduring. It arises from living in harmony with selfhood, destiny, moral responsibility, and the communal order.

The reconstruction proposed in this research does not reject Maslow's insights but re-situates them within an ontological horizon. Need satisfaction is best understood as a necessary condition that enables human striving, not as the ultimate goal of motivation. Ontological fulfilment, by contrast, provides the purpose towards which motivation is directed. By integrating Maslow's psychological account of motivation with Igbo metaphysical understanding of personhood, this research

advances a more comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation- one that is simultaneously psychological, ontological, moral, and communal.

In conclusion, the shift from need satisfaction to ontological fulfilment offers a richer and more philosophically grounded account of human motivation. It demonstrates how African philosophy, particularly Igbo ontology, can contribute theory-generative insights to contemporary debates in psychology, philosophy, and human development. By re-conceiving fulfilment as fulfilled being rather than satisfied need, this research affirms the relevance of indigenous African metaphysics in addressing universal questions about what it means to live a truly fulfilled human life.

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