

WHAT CONSTITUTES SELF-FULFILMENT? REFLECTIONS ON MACINTYRE’S THEORY OF PRACTICE

Anthony Odunze PhD

Pope John Paul II Major Seminary, Awka, Nigeria

ifeanyiodunze19@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Every age, people, and culture – asks and provides responses to the question of meaning or human fulfilment. In line with the continuous biological, socio-political, and techno-scientific evolution of human beings, the modes of enquiry and the responses are constantly changing. In those ages and cultures where socio-political structures promoted social virtues, the common good and virtues ranked high among the responses to the question of fulfilment. Conversely, in ages and cultures where the disengaged-self is prioritized over social roles, personal wellbeing and private goods dominated the scale of responses. In such cultures of individualism – particularly our contemporary virtual culture – mentorship and guidance on good living are not virtue-based, as they are within virtue-oriented communities. Instead, responses to the questions of self-fulfilment are exclusively reserved to the individuals and a few others whose claim of influence align with private convictions. This paper interrogates the new modes of posing the question of self-fulfilment in light of Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue theory of practice. MacIntyre maintains that the question of happiness or self-fulfilment can be rightly posed and adequately answered only within a community defined by certain practices and oriented toward shared virtues. Consequently, this study establishes critical dialogues between MacIntyrean system of ethics and modern as well as contemporary individualism. It also critically engages MacIntyre’s notion of practice to assess the extent to which he responds to the question of self-fulfilment, while evaluating his attempt to establish an objective standard of virtue.

Some keywords: *Happiness, self-fulfilment, human good, practice Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-2025)*

My happiness, your happiness

‘What constitutes self-fulfilment’ – is a question everyone asks. The responses often differ with respect to diversity of cultures and moral worldviews. Even among people who share same cultural milieu, the question about human good or human fulfilment divides them. In his treatises on morality Aristotle provides an example of such dissension about human good – between some 4th century Athenians who inhabit the same *polis* – there was no univocal response to what human fulfilment consists in.¹ In the new age, it becomes even more complex to mention the term, happiness or self-fulfilment. It is one of the most misconstrued terminologies within the contemporary moral space.

As understood in contemporary parlance, the concept of happiness is evidently not a matter of fact. The term ‘fact’ refers to a point of objectivity, distinct from the sphere of privatized opinion or subjectivism. In post-modern culture, happiness has become a private affair and a domain of opinion. Even political and economic institutions purport to manufacture ‘boxes of happiness’ through political promises and consumer products, which are disseminated through media channels. Recently, Apple-electronic company has been said to enhance the happiness of its consumers through the annual improvement of products such as iPhones and iPads. This claim maybe considered valid, insofar as the tastes of the consuming masses and their emotional states are constantly exploited and reshaped by goods-manufacturing companies. There are no such things as original desires and original tastes anymore. Original consumer tastes and wishes no longer exist; they are rather determined by the market. Consequently, we are always in wait of the newest iPhones because they are believed to increase our happiness. We do not know what we want – the market tells us.

In the contemporary digital culture, to be fulfilled also implies recognition – specifically, the number of ‘likes’ one gets within the

digital space. These ‘likes’ are imbued with some sort of fame, such that we become happy by gaining digital visibility, while the absence of recognition yields unfulfillment. Other contemporary ‘boxes of happiness’ include wellness activities, mindfulness meditations, yoga sessions, and so on. These fast-growing therapeutic movements maintain that happiness consists in silence and soul-searching activities. On the other side, the capitalist-oriented cultures promote the maxim: ‘more money; more happiness’. In one of his works, MacIntyre alludes to a public poll conducted in England in 2010 concerning the constituent of self-fulfilment. According to the proceedings, “it has been reported that in the United Kingdom an increase of one thousand pounds in someone’s annual salary on average increases their happiness by 0.0007 points on a seven-point scale, while their seeing their friends somewhat more often on average increases their happiness by 0.161 points on the same scale (Financial Times, August 28, 2010).”²

Even our intellectual predecessors, the modern philosophers, also held confusing and conflicting opinions as to what happiness consists in. In the West, authors like David Hume would argue that happiness consists in the maximization of pleasurable sentiments and eschewing pain.³ From the other pole of the West, Immanuel Kant says that happiness consists in the conformity of human will to the supreme rule of human reason.⁴ In the East, as well as within much of the eighteenth-century African moral milieu, to be fulfilled was understood as being at peace with the gods of the land, blessed with fertility (expressed in the bearing of many children), material prosperity, courage, and longevity of life.⁵

Following the foregoing backdrop, anyone who undertakes a historical enquiry into the constituents of human fulfilment would likely conclude that the idea of happiness is not an objective fact; rather, a matter of subjective interpretation – you have your conception of happiness and I have mine. Hence, arguments and opinions keep multiplying. In fact, some contemporary theorists

have canonized this diversity of perspectives on human happiness into a philosophical aphorism. The theorists in question argue that any attempt to establish an objective account of the constituents of human fulfilment is merely an expression of preferences and personal feelings. Accordingly, if every opinion about human happiness represents a private vision of the good life, then it becomes impossible to establish a common standard of living in the new age.

Within the old societies, where a standard of good living was conceived in reference to the common good, self-fulfilment was associated with virtuous life – such that a fulfilled human being was regarded as synonymous to virtuous human being. In those societies, the mentors of good living and character are virtuous men esteemed within their communities. Aristotle affirms this in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, arguing that only virtuous men are qualified to say what constitutes human fulfilment.⁶ Conversely, in our contemporary culture of individualism, mentors of character and good living are usually digital influencers or virtual celebrities whose notions of fulfilment correspond to our private notions of self-fulfilment. Social media provides both a sense of security for unchecked influence and the platform for mass followership. Within this virtual culture, anyone – regardless of his or her values and convictions – may become a character influencer or moral guide. One might argue that some Instagram influencers and TikTokers are also virtuous men – this work does not intend to dispute that. However, such an affirmation invites a further challenge. The proponent faces an arduous task of engaging on multiple checks and evaluations of individual influencers – from their backgrounds to their convictions – as to decipher what informs their objectives and visions of self-fulfilment. Moreover, the conflict of opinions and the privatization of human good are even more intensified within the digital space – it often everyone to their own styles and ideals. Accordingly, the culture of individualism –

particularly advanced through digital force – denies that the object of human fulfilment is a matter of fact; therefore, views inevitably diverge.

MacIntyre stands back from these contradicting opinions, maintaining that there must exist an objective vision of human happiness. He argues that the question of human fulfilment is posed within the context of the family, workplace, community, tribe, defined by certain human practices. A communal vision of the object of human fulfilment is formed within the context of the practices that shape the community. For him, virtuous mentorship requires real life social contact, and the vision of human happiness is formed communally rather than privately. Unlike the modern Instagrammer, TikToker, or the capitalist entrepreneur, MacIntyre learned from Aristotle that human fulfilment does not consist in virtual recognition, fame, or wealth, but rather in a distinct activity or function unique to human beings, namely, intellectual activity or contemplation. Reasoning or contemplation is that activity which is specific to human beings alone. A thing is said to be good when it fulfils its function. For instance, a watch is good if it keeps the time accurately. By analogy, a human being is said to be happy if he performs his rational function excellently – that is, virtuously. He also learned from Aristotle that this activity must not be periodical or temporary, it must be consistent. Accordingly, a happy life for human beings is that which is spent in a continual search for happiness.⁷

Nevertheless, the ingenuity of MacIntyre's theory lies in his proposition that the proper conception of the highest human activity – contemplation – is adequately formed only within the multiplicity of human practices that constitute the community.

From the more self-evident to the less evident human good

The notion of devoting one's entire life to the search for fulfilment recalls the question already posed: is happiness a matter of objective fact? If the object of such a search is a self-evident fact, then an entire life would appear excessive for such a voyage of discovery. On the other hand, the expression "a lifetime in search" could also signify the arduous nature of the search itself. The search for 'the human good' can be paralleled with the search for 'the truth' at the realm of theoretical reasoning. Aristotle, for instance, observes that the enquiry into transcendental properties such as 'truth' – or, in our case, 'the goodness of human life' – is a profoundly difficult engagement. Moreover, the difficulty of apprehending these objects does not lie in the objects themselves, but rather in the limitations of the enquirers. He likens this experience to that of bats (*uccelli notturni*), who are blinded by daylight.

Similarly, the human soul is initially overwhelmed when confronted with transcendental objects such as truth and goodness.⁸ At first contact, the beaming nature of 'truth' or 'good' blinds the eyes of human soul. Then, the soul goes through a strenuous process of enquiry as to apprehend every part of these objects before it ultimately embraces them. MacIntyre appears to have from *The Philosopher* that, although the investigation of human happiness or human good is rigorous, it remains attainable. In fact, Aristotle considers those transcendentals (truth, unity, good, etc.) to be the clearest objects of the mind. Hence, they are simultaneously self-evident to reason and yet exceedingly difficult to apprehend. In other words, while we all have an idea of what is the good life for human beings, the challenge lies in apprehending and demonstrating its precise content.

It has been established so far that the good life for human being is a knowable. However, since it is not immediately known or evident to every human being, Aristotle proposes in the *Nicomachean*

Ethics that the enquiry should commence from what is already known to us.⁹ Faithful to this methodological approach, MacIntyre pursues the question of human fulfilment – or, as he terms it – human flourishing – by moving from what is most evident in the milieu where he grew up to that which is less evident. The search for the good life is a concern of practical enquiry; and accordingly, the core of his moral theory is dominated by what he calls, ‘practice’.

Practice and the human good

MacIntyre compiles a list of various human practices which are very common to us today: fishing, music, chess, football, science, art, war, and so on. According to him, there are some ends or goods which are internal to these practices; that is, the goods which are most evident to those who indulge in those practices. In relation to the rapport between the practices and the goods internal to them, he provides the following definition of practice: “By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and good involved, are systematically extended.”¹⁰ In other words, every practice embodies specific goods that can be achieved only by adhering to the rules particular to each practice. Choices, preferences, and tastes, are all subject to the rule of the practices in order to attain the goods internal to them. One cannot simply act according to personal preferences – standards are inherent in the practices themselves.

Following Aristotle’s proposition, MacIntyre begins his enquiry into the good life for human beings with the most evident goods internal various human practices. For instance, chess-playing embodies some internal goods, namely, achievement of highly

particular type of analytical skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity. These goods are most evident within the practice of chess. There are, of course, external goods contingently attached to chess-playing, namely prestige, status, and money. These external goods are often identified by virtual influencers and capitalist intrapreneurs as constituting human happiness. Conversely, just like Aristotle does,¹¹ MacIntyre disqualifies such external goods as proper to the activity of the human soul. According to him, the good life for human beings must be investigated among the goods or ends internal to human practices, in that internal goods transform both the individual player as well as the community of participants engaged in the practice in question. The internal goods of chess render excellent not only the individual player but also the group of chess players. As hitherto noted, a thing is said to be good if it functions excellently. Accordingly, when the goods internal to chess are attained, the player becomes an excellent or a virtuous chess-player. An excellent chess-player is, in this sense, synonymous with a happy chess-player. Accordingly, what constitutes the happiness of a chess-player is knowable to us. The same applies to all other practices enumerated above.

Nevertheless, the happiness of human beings extends beyond chess-playing, fishing, football, and similar activities. The goals attained by playing chess or doing sciences do not satisfy the human search for self-fulfilment. At this point the enquirers remain at the level of conflict and private opinions about the constituents of human fulfilment. The chess player says it is this, while the fisher says it is that – *alii dicunt hoc, alii dicunt illu*. The object of our enquiry is the good life for human being as such – not merely as a fisher or chess-player. How, then, does MacIntyre move from the most evident goods of practices to the less evident good of human beings as such? Out of the varieties of internal goods inherent in human practices, he sought the distinct good which could be

delineated as supreme human happiness, or the final human good. Every good is limited to the practice that embodies it – the good of fishing is not identical to that of science. To overcome the competition among limited goods, MacIntyre argues that there must exist a certain final good which transcends all human practices. It is such good that would constitute the happiness of a whole human life. He provides several criteria for identifying the kind of good that constitutes human fulfilment: (a) it must be an end that can be pursued by a human being throughout all stages of life. (b) it must be capable of complete fulfilment when attained. (c) it must be distinct from partial goods such as power, wealth, pleasure, or honour. (d) it must stand as a measure in relation to other goods.¹²

Having arrived at the nature of the good for human beings, it is left to ascertain what it consists in. Quoting his response verbatim, the MacIntyre writes:

“To live well is to act so as to move toward achieving the best goods of which one is capable and so as to become the kind of agent capable of achieving those goods. But there is no particular finite good the achievement of which perfects and completes one’s life. There is always something else and something more to be attained, whatever one’s attainments. The perfection and completion of a life consist in an agent’s having persisted in moving toward and beyond the best goods of which she or he knows. So, there is presupposed some further good, a good toward which desire tends insofar as it remains unsatisfied by even the most desirable of finite goods, as in good lives it does. But, here the enquiries of politics and ethics end. Here natural theology begins.”¹³

Responding to his submission, many authors criticised MacIntyre as being vague and indeterminate. McMylor, for instance, argues that MacIntyre does not clearly situate practices within any *ad hoc*

hierarchical relationship – remarking that, “This in itself, does not, however, settle the question that is Aristotle’s, ‘what is the good life for man?’”¹⁴ O’Neil shares McMyler’s concern as well. According to him, “MacIntyre... offers no determinate conception of the good for man. He takes it that our moral starting-point must be given, but not that there is any universal moral stand-point. The practices in which our lives are set are given but varied.”¹⁵ These authors allege that MacIntyre himself becomes a victim of the individualistic culture which he seeks to criticise.

Conversely, this paper maintains the conviction that MacIntyre indicates a new way of considering his thesis – the way of virtue. Virtue, and the role of the virtuous, occupy a crucial place in his search for the good for human beings.

Virtue and human happiness

As is common among virtue ethicists, MacIntyre argues that virtue sustains the search for human happiness. Virtue plays a distinctive role in his practice-based ethics. For him, virtues are dispositions which sustain human practices and enable the achievement of the goods internal to them. Furthermore, having extended the enquiry to the search for a certain infinite good – virtue also assumes a role of sustaining the quest for the ultimate end. From birth, virtues are acquired to sustain the entire life, which is spent in search of the good.

From whom do we learn the virtues? Contemporary virtual culture has developed a unique terminology to address this question. At present, the term ‘mentorship’ appears opaque and has been replaced by the term ‘influencing’. Unlike in the old societies, where good living and character were learned through *mimesis* – that is, through critical imitation of virtuous men (mentorship) – contemporary human beings learn about life goals through digital influencers or celebrities. The term *influencing* is troubling and

shallow in significance. It raises many questions: Who are these influencers? What influenced them prior to their own role as influencers? What is the content of the influence? The questions continue endlessly.

MacIntyre reverts back to the tradition form of *mimesis*, whereby young people learn to become virtuous within the context of the family, the community, virtuous friends, teachers, and the church. The search for the good life is never a private affair – it involves those others from whom we learn the pursuit and those who scrutinize our judgement about self-fulfilment. Most importantly, from them we learn to distinguish virtue from vice, and the virtuous from the vicious. This distinction is important, for the acquisition of virtues does not entail conformism. Everyone has the duty of becoming an independent seeker of the truth – capable of standing back from what has been learned and making critical judgements.

In any case, MacIntyre learns from Aristotle that we need virtuous mentors as we continue the search for self-fulfilment. As Aristotle would argue, the supreme good – or human happiness – is known to the virtuous man,¹⁶ in that happiness consists in a life of virtue. Accordingly, MacIntyre found a virtuous mentor in Aristotle. Contemporary moral society needs mentors of virtues, not digital influencers. A community built on shallow virtual contact lacks the foundations of strong virtues such as mutual respect, honesty, charity, and fidelity to promises – virtues that, in turn, sustain systems of marriage, family bonds, and social relations.

During the last four decades of his search for human happiness, MacIntyre discovered another mentor – Thomas Aquinas, of whom he wrote: “When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist... I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle.”¹⁷ Declaring himself a Thomist, he endorsed Aquinas’ manner of searching for

human happiness. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), he chose Aquinas' tradition-based ethics over every form of modern universal ethics (especially its Kantian and Humean forms). In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990), he defended Thomism against the encyclopaedic form of moral enquiry and Nietzsche's genealogical enquiry. In *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), *God, Philosophy, Universities* (2009), and *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity* (2016), he expands and consolidates his Thomistic convictions.

Following this line of thought, it is valid to argue that MacIntyre's 'practice-based' enquiry into the human good culminates in Aquinas' theological theory of the highest good. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas argues that the good which surpasses all competing limited goods consists in the excellent functioning of the highest part of human being – the soul, or the intellect. The soul's highest activity is the contemplation of divine objects.¹⁸ This thesis was completed in the *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas maintains that some objects (e.g. angels and the first principles) of contemplation are divine only by participation, and thus would not completely fulfil the yearning of the human soul. Accordingly, the perfection of the contemplative activity of the intellect consists in the possession of the highest knowledge which is not participated truth but pure essence: God.¹⁹ This marks the culmination of MacIntyre's moral enquiry.

Endless Progress toward the highest Good: Farewell Alasdair
Shall we actually attain self-fulfilment? Is there a point we get completely satisfied? Did MacIntyre himself attain self-fulfilment before he passed away on May 21, 2025? It was Kant who, after his rigorous defense of rational virtue, acknowledged the frailty of the power of human reason. According to him, since perfect virtue eludes us here below, we must assume that our quest for perfection

consists in an endless progress toward the highest good. Accordingly, our souls must be immortal to sustain such an endless quest. And there must exist a God who serves as the guarantor of our quest; otherwise, the quest is futile.²⁰ Put differently, our pursuit of self-fulfilment reaches its climax beyond the terrestrial realm.

Consequently, MacIntyre acknowledged that there must exist an infinite object of human fulfilment. He had earlier argued that the enquiry into such an object lies beyond the scope of Ethics and Politics, belonging instead to the domain of Natural Theology. However, following his philosophical conversions, it is my hope that his terrestrial ethical pursuit has progressed into the transcendent and ended in God – the First Cause, of whom Aquinas says: “For perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus, it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which man’s happiness consists.”²¹

Endnotes

¹ “On the one hand the generality of men and the most vulgar identify the good with pleasure... men of refinement, on the other hand, and men of action think that the good is honour.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, 1095b16-20, trans. Harris Rackham (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Limited, 1996), p. 7.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 195.

³ Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. 3, Pt. 1, Sec. 1, in Charlotte Brown & William Morris’ compilation of *The Essential Philosophical Works of Hume*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Limited, 2011), p. 409.

⁴ Cf. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:393, ed. Mary Gregor et al, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 9.

⁵ Cf. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* in “The African Trilogy,” Ch. 21, (London: Everyman’s Library, 2010), p. 86.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VII, Ch. V, 1141b7-32, cit., p. 152.

⁷ “Moreover, this activity must occupy a complete lifetime; for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one fine day make; and similarly, one day or a brief period of happiness does not make a man supremely blessed and happy”. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, 1098a4-29, cit., p. 13.

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 993a-b, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred, (London: Penguin Group, 2002), p. 43.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, 1095a22-b16, cit., p. 6.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, III edition, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 218.

¹¹ “But honour after all seems superficial to be the good for which we are seeking; since it appears to depend on those who confer it more than on him upon which it is conferred, whereas we instinctively feel that the good must be something proper to its possessor and not easy to be taken away from him.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, 1095b16-1096a9, cit., p. 7.

¹² Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, cit., p. 53.

¹³ Ibid, p. 315.

¹⁴ Peter McMyler, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity*, (London: Routledge Publishing, 1994), p. 153.

¹⁵ Onora O’Neil, “I. Kant After Virtue,” Vol. I, in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 2008, p. 402.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, 1095a22-b16, cit., p. 6.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, cit., p. XIII.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 2087, trans. C. I. Litzinger, (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1964), p. 625.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. III, Art. VII, trans. Dominicans, (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948), p. 564.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:122, (Cambridge: University Press, 2015), pp. 98-99.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. III, Art. VIII, cit., p. 565.