FROM HIERARCHIES TO ONTOLOGICAL FIELDS: RETHINKING HUMAN NEEDS THROUGH MASLOW AND IGBO METAPHYSICS

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Abstract
This research reconsiders dominant hierarchical models of human needs by interrogating their philosophical assumptions and proposing an alternative ontological framework. The problem addressed is that Abraham Maslow**'s** hierarchical representation of human needs, though influential, conceptualizes human life primarily through linear stages of satisfaction, thereby obscuring the metaphysical depth and relational complexity of human existence. Employing a philosophical method that combines critical analysis and comparative metaphysics, the study examines Maslow's hierarchy alongside Igbo metaphysical conceptions of personhood, being, and destiny, with particular attention to *mmadu* (person), *onwe* (selfhood), *chi* (destiny), and communal embeddedness. The findings reveal that while Maslow's hierarchy explains motivational ordering, it inadequately accounts for the simultaneity, relationality, and ontological grounding of human needs. The research concludes by proposing a shift from hierarchical models to ontological fields**,** in which human needs are understood as interrelated expressions of being rather than as ascending levels of satisfaction, thereby offering a metaphysically richer and culturally grounded re-conceptualization of human needs.
Keywords: Human Needs, Hierarchy of Needs, Ontological Fields, Igbo Metaphysics, Personhood

Introduction
The concept of human needs has been one of the most influential organizing principles in modern accounts of human motivation and development. Among these accounts, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains one of the most widely cited model, presenting human life as a progression through ordered stages of need satisfaction. In this framework, needs are arranged vertically, beginning with physiological survival and culminating in self-actualization and, in later formulations, self-transcendence.[i] The hierarchical structure of the model has shaped psychological theory, development studies, education, management, and public policy, reinforcing the assumption that human needs are best understood as ascending levels to be satisfied sequentially. Later reconstructions of Maslow's theory show that self-transcendence extends beyond classical hierarchical models.[ii]

Despite its influence, Maslow's hierarchical representation raises significant philosophical questions about the nature of human needs. Critical analyses of the hierarchy note that the pyramid metaphor imposes linearity, priority, and closure on phenomena that are often simultaneous, relational, and context-dependent.[iii] Needs are treated as discrete units competing for satisfaction, rather than as interconnected dimensions of human existence. As a result, the hierarchy explains motivational ordering but struggles to account for the complex ways in which human beings experience multiple needs at once and interpret them within broader meanings of life, purpose, and identity.

Subsequent revisions of Maslow's theory acknowledge some of these difficulties. Dynamic and non-hierarchical reconstructions argue that needs may overlap, recur, and interact throughout life rather than being permanently resolved.[iv] Visual and conceptual reworkings of the pyramid attempt to capture this fluidity, yet they largely preserve the underlying assumption that needs are best understood within a motivational framework. Even when the rigid hierarchy is softened, the theory remains psychologically oriented, offering limited insight into the ontological status of needs themselves.

This limitation becomes evident when Maslow's notion is examined through metaphysical inquiry. By focusing on how needs motivate behaviour, the theory leaves unexamined what needs *are* in relation to human being. Needs appear as deficiencies to be overcome rather than as expressions of the structure of existence. Consequently, the hierarchy explains the management of lack but not the ontological significance of human needfulness. Fulfilment, within this model, remains tied to satisfaction rather than to being. Igbo metaphysics offers a fundamentally different perspective

on human needs. Within Igbo ontology, the human person (*mmadu*) is understood as a being whose existence unfolds through interconnected dimensions of selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral responsibility, and communal embeddedness. Philosophical studies of Igbo personhood emphasize that these dimensions are not arranged hierarchically but coexist as an integrated field of being.[v] From this standpoint, needs are not merely psychological deficits but ontological expressions of what it means to exist as a person situated within a moral and cosmic order.

The problem this research addresses is the inadequacy of hierarchical models in capturing the ontological complexity of human needs. While Maslow's hierarchy offers a powerful motivational explanation, it reduces needs to stages of satisfaction and obscures their relational and metaphysical dimensions. By placing Maslow's theory in dialogue with Igbo metaphysics, this research proposes a shift from hierarchical thinking to the concept of *ontological fields*. In this alternative framework, human needs are understood as interrelated expressions of being rather than as ascending levels of deficiency. This re-conceptualization not only challenges the dominance of hierarchical models but also demonstrates how African metaphysics contributes original and theory-generative insights to contemporary debates on human needs and fulfilment. Indigenous metaphysical perspectives further challenge psychologically reductionist accounts of human motivation.[vi]

Hierarchical Models of Human Needs and Their Limits
Hierarchical models of human needs attempt to impose order on the complexity of human motivation by arranging needs according to priority and sequence. The most influential of these models is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which represents human life as an upward movement from basic physiological requirements to higher psychological and self-fulfilling goals. In this model, needs are structured vertically, suggesting that lower needs must be sufficiently satisfied before higher needs can meaningfully guide behaviour.[vii] The hierarchy thus offers a clear and intuitive framework for understanding motivational progression.

The strength of the hierarchical approach lies in its explanatory simplicity. By ordering needs according to urgency, Maslow's model captures the observable fact that deprivation shapes attention, behaviour, and choice. Empirical and applied studies based on the hierarchy demonstrate its usefulness in explaining patterns of motivation in education, organizational management, housing, and social development.[viii] Hierarchy, in this sense, functions as a heuristic device that clarifies why certain needs dominate human concern under conditions of scarcity.

However, critical analyses of Maslow's hierarchy point out that this ordering imposes *linearity and finality* on processes that are often fluid and recursive. Needs are treated as stages to be completed rather than as dimensions that persist and interact throughout life.[ix] Once a need is satisfied, it is assumed to recede permanently, allowing the individual to progress upward. Yet empirical investigations into deficiency and growth needs reveal that lower needs frequently reassert themselves even after higher needs have emerged.[x] This undermines the assumption that development follows a one-directional path.

Another limitation of hierarchical models is their tendency to *reify needs as discrete units* competing for satisfaction. In the pyramid representation, needs appear as separable blocks stacked upon one another. Such visualization obscures the lived reality in which physiological, emotional, social, moral, and existential concerns often coexist simultaneously. Dynamic reconstructions of Maslow's hierarchy acknowledge this overlap, yet they continue to rely on hierarchical logic as the primary organizing principle.[xi] The result is a softened hierarchy rather than a fundamentally different understanding of need structure.

Hierarchical models also struggle to account for the *contextual and relational nature* of human needs. By prioritizing internal motivation, Maslow's framework interprets needs largely as individual psychological states. Studies applying the hierarchy across economic, cultural, and social contexts demonstrate that needs are interpreted, prioritized, and experienced differently depending on communal norms and existential meanings.[xii] Hierarchy, however, abstracts needs from these contexts, treating them as universally ordered regardless of cultural or metaphysical background.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of hierarchical models is their implicit *reduction of need to deficiency*. Needs are conceptualized primarily as lacks that must be satisfied in order to remove tension and restore balance. Even higher needs such as esteem and self-actualization are framed as internal requirements whose satisfaction produces fulfilment.[xiii] This deficit-oriented logic explains motivation effectively but fails to address whether needs might also

express positive dimensions of human being rather than merely the absence of satisfaction. Even in its expanded form, Maslow's framework remains largely grounded in psychological individualism.[xiv]

Taken together, these limitations suggest that hierarchical models, while descriptively useful, offer an incomplete account of human needs. By emphasizing order, sequence, and satisfaction, they obscure simultaneity, relationality, and ontological depth. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to revise the hierarchy but to rethink the very framework within which needs are understood. This challenge opens the way for an alternative metaphysical approach- one that conceives human needs not as stacked levels of deficiency but as interrelated expressions within an *ontological field* of human existence.

Igbo Metaphysics and the Ontological Field of Needs
Igbo metaphysics approaches human existence through an integrated ontology in which the dimensions of life are not arranged hierarchically but coexist as interrelated aspects of being. In Igbo metaphysics, human fulfilment is inseparable from moral alignment and metaphysical harmony.[xv] In contrast to psychological models that conceptualize needs as sequential deficits, Igbo philosophy understands needfulness as intrinsic to existence itself. The human person (*mmadu*) is constituted through a convergence of selfhood, destiny, moral responsibility, and communal embeddedness, forming what may be described as an *ontological field* rather than a vertical structure of needs.

Central to this metaphysical vision is the Igbo conception of *mmadu* as a unified reality. Philosophical analyses emphasize that *mmadu* denotes the totality of human existence, encompassing the physical, spiritual, moral, and relational dimensions simultaneously.[xvi] Needs, from this standpoint, do not appear as isolated lacks to be overcome but as expressions of the multiple dimensions through which being is lived. Hunger, belonging, moral obligation, and existential meaning are not ranked stages but co-present aspects of the human condition.

The concept of *onwe* provides further grounding for this field-based understanding. *Onwe* refers to the metaphysical core of selfhood that anchors personal identity and agency. Studies on Igbo self-personhood show that *onwe* is ontologically prior to social roles and psychological states.[xvii] As a result, needs related to identity, recognition, and meaning arise not after basic survival is secured but concurrently with existence as a self. The need for selfhood is thus not a higher-level aspiration but a constitutive dimension of being. Destiny (*chi*) introduces an additional ontological layer to the structure of needs. Igbo metaphysical studies interpret *chi* as a personal life principle that situates the individual within a meaningful cosmic order.[xviii] From this perspective, needs are oriented towards the realization of destiny rather than merely toward satisfaction. Material, social, and moral needs coexist within the ontological field as conditions through which destiny is pursued and interpreted. This orientation dissolves the rigid separation between "lower" and "higher" needs characteristic of hierarchical models.

Moral obligation further illustrates the field-like nature of needs in Igbo metaphysics. Moral responsibility is not treated as an emergent concern that appears only after survival and security are achieved. Instead, moral consciousness accompanies personhood from its inception. Analyses of Igbo moral systems emphasize that ethical demands are woven into everyday existence and are inseparable from other dimensions of life.[xix] Moral needs, therefore, do not occupy a higher rung on a pyramid but intersect continuously with material, social, and existential concerns. Communal life completes the ontological field by situating individual needs within shared meanings and relationships. Igbo philosophy understands community not merely as a context for satisfying belongingness needs but as a constitutive dimension of personhood. Studies on *akonauche* and social order demonstrate that creativity, responsibility, and moral judgment emerge through active participation in communal life.[xx] Needs related to recognition, contribution, and harmony thus operate alongside physiological and social needs within the same ontological space.

Taken together, these metaphysical elements, *mmadu*, *onwe*, *chi*, moral obligation, and community- form an *ontological field of needs* in which no single dimension exhausts or supersedes the others. Needs are simultaneous, relational, and mutually conditioning expressions of being rather than stages to be completed and left behind. This field-based conception challenges the logic of hierarchical ordering and reframes human needfulness as an enduring feature of existence. By articulating human needs as ontological fields, Igbo metaphysics offers a profound alternative to hierarchical models. It explains why human beings continue to experience moral, existential, and communal needs even when material conditions are satisfied, and why fulfilment cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of prioritized

deficits. This ontological framework prepares the ground for a reconstructed understanding of human needs- one that integrates motivation, meaning, and being without collapsing them into a linear hierarchy.

From Hierarchies to Ontological Fields- A Reconstructed Theory of Human Needs
The preceding analyses reveal that the limitations of hierarchical models of human needs do not arise merely from their rigidity but from their underlying metaphysical assumptions. Hierarchies presuppose that needs are discrete deficits arranged by priority and resolved through sequential satisfaction. This assumption structures Abraham Maslow's theory and its later revisions, even where the hierarchy is softened or made dynamic. A reconstructed theory of human needs must therefore move beyond modifying the pyramid and instead rethink the ontological status of needs themselves. Maslow's enduring contribution lies in his recognition that human motivation is structured and intelligible rather than random. His distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs captures important differences in how lack and aspiration shape behaviour.[xxi] However, when these insights are interpreted ontologically rather than hierarchically, they point towards a different conclusion: human needs do not culminate in a final state of satisfaction but persist as interrelated dimensions of existence. Growth needs do not replace deficiency needs; they coexist with them as expressions of a developing life-world.

Igbo metaphysics provides the conceptual resources for articulating this coexistence. Igbo ontology conceives the human person (*mmadu*) as constituted by simultaneous dimensions of selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral responsibility, and communal embeddedness.[xxii] Within this framework, needs are not stages to be completed but *fields of concern* that arise from the structure of being itself. Material sustenance, moral obligation, recognition, and existential meaning operate concurrently within the ontological field of personhood.

Reconstructing human needs as ontological fields allows Maslow's psychological insights to be retained without reducing fulfilment to satisfaction. Physiological and security needs can be understood as expressions of embodied existence; belonging and esteem as expressions of relational being; self-actualization and transcendence as expressions of purposive and value-oriented existence.[xxiii] These expressions do not form a ladder but a network in which each dimension conditions and is conditioned by the others. Needfulness, therefore, is not a problem to be solved once and for all but a permanent feature of finite existence. This field-based reconstruction also resolves the problem of recurrence that troubles hierarchical models. Empirical studies show that lower needs resurface even in advanced stages of life and that higher aspirations can persist amid material scarcity.[xxiv] Ontological fields account for this reality by recognizing that human existence is never exhausted by a single dimension. Hunger, meaning, moral duty, and communal responsibility can press simultaneously because they arise from different but interconnected aspects of being.

Moreover, the ontological-field model restores moral and communal significance to human needs without subordinating them to psychological progression. In Igbo metaphysics, moral obligation is not a higher-order concern that emerges after security is achieved; it is intrinsic to personhood from the outset.[xxv] Recognition by others, similarly, is not merely an esteem need but a confirmation of one's standing within the moral field of the community. These insights challenge the implicit individualism of hierarchical models and reframe needs as relational and ethically charged.

The reconstructed theory also clarifies the meaning of fulfilment. In hierarchical frameworks, fulfilment is often implied to occur when the highest need is satisfied. In the ontological-field model, fulfilment consists in *harmonious integration* across the fields of existence- embodied, relational, moral, and existential. Fulfilment is not the absence of need but the meaningful negotiation of needfulness within the structure of being. This conception aligns with Igbo metaphysical emphasis on balance, alignment with destiny, and responsible participation in communal life.[xxvi] Religious and ritual dimensions further reinforce the relational structure of human motivation.[xxvii]

By moving from hierarchies to ontological fields, this reconstructed theory of human needs preserves the explanatory strengths of Maslow's psychology while overcoming its metaphysical limitations. Needs are no longer viewed as rungs on a ladder leading to completion, but as enduring expressions of what it means to exist as a person. This shift offers a more adequate account of human experience- one that explains motivation, accommodates cultural variation, and grounds fulfilment in being rather than in sequential satisfaction. In doing so, it demonstrates how Igbo metaphysics contributes a philosophically robust alternative framework for rethinking human needs in contemporary theory.

Conclusion

This research set out to rethink dominant hierarchical models of human needs by interrogating their underlying philosophical assumptions and proposing an alternative metaphysical framework. Through a critical engagement with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the research demonstrated that while hierarchical ordering offers a useful heuristic for understanding motivational priority, it ultimately reduces human needfulness to sequential deficiency and satisfaction. Such reduction obscures the simultaneity, relationality, and ontological depth of human existence.

The analysis showed that revisions of Maslow's pyramid- whether dynamic, non-linear, or expanded to include self-transcendence- do not fundamentally escape hierarchical logic. Even when softened, the pyramid continues to interpret needs as stages to be overcome rather than as enduring expressions of human being. As a result, fulfilment remains tied to the completion of motivational levels rather than to the meaningful integration of life's multiple dimensions.

Igbo metaphysics provides a decisive alternative to this hierarchical imagination. By conceiving the human person (*mmadu*) as constituted through interconnected dimensions of selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral responsibility, and communal embeddedness, Igbo philosophy reframes human needs as *ontological fields* rather than ordered levels. Needs are understood not as isolated lacks competing for priority but as co-present expressions of finite existence within a moral and cosmic order. Hunger, belonging, moral obligation, recognition, and existential meaning coexist because they arise from different but inseparable dimensions of being. An ontologically grounded model of motivation offers a more inclusive framework for human development.[xxviii] The reconstructed theory advanced in this paper preserves the explanatory strengths of Maslow's psychology while overcoming its metaphysical limitations. Interpreted through the lens of ontological fields, Maslow's insights into motivation illuminate how different dimensions of existence press upon human life without implying a final state of completion. Fulfilment, in this framework, is no longer the satisfaction of a highest need but the ongoing, harmonious negotiation of needfulness within the structure of being.

In conclusion, the shift from hierarchies to ontological fields offers a more adequate and philosophically grounded account of human needs. It explains why needs persist across the lifespan, why moral and existential concerns do not disappear with material security, and why fulfilment cannot be reduced to psychological satisfaction. By bringing Maslow's theory into dialogue with Igbo metaphysics, this study demonstrates how African philosophy contributes original, theory-generative insights to global discussions on human needs, motivation, and fulfilment. Human beings are not ladder-climbers ascending toward completion, but beings-in-need whose lives unfold within interconnected fields of existence that call for balance, responsibility, and meaning.

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