

## WHY SELF-ACTUALIZATION IS NOT THE HIGHEST HUMAN GOOD: AN IGBO ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF MASLOW'S PYRAMID

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### Abstract

This research critically interrogates the widespread assumption within humanistic psychology that self-actualization represents the highest human good. The problem addressed is that Abraham Maslow's hierarchical model of human needs elevates self-actualization as the ultimate goal of human motivation, thereby reducing the highest form of human fulfilment to an individual psychological achievement. This research is anchored on methods of critical analysis and comparative hermeneutics. The research examines Maslow's conception of self-actualization in dialogue with Igbo ontology of personhood, particularly the metaphysical roles of *mmadu* (person), *onwe* (selfhood), *chi* (destiny), moral becoming, and communal responsibility. The findings reveal that while self-actualization explains creativity, autonomy, and personal growth, it remains insufficient as the highest human good because it lacks ontological grounding and marginalizes destiny, moral obligation, and communal fulfilment. The research concludes that Igbo philosophy re-conceives the highest human good not as self-actualization but as ontological fulfilment achieved through alignment of being, destiny, moral responsibility, and community. It offers a culturally grounded critique and reconstruction of Maslow's pyramid.

**Keywords:** Self-actualization, Highest Human Good, Maslow's Hierarchy, Igbo Ontology, Personhood

### Introduction

Within humanistic psychology, few ideas have enjoyed as much influence as the claim that self-actualization represents the highest fulfilment of human life. This claim is most prominently articulated in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where self-actualization appears as the apex of human motivation and the ultimate goal towards which all lower needs are directed. In this paradigm, the highest human good is defined primarily in psychological terms: the realization of inner potential, creativity, autonomy, and personal authenticity.<sup>i</sup> Over time, this conception has been widely adopted not only within psychology but also in education, management, development studies, and popular understandings of human flourishing. Later revisions of Maslow's theory acknowledge self-transcendence but retain a predominantly psychological orientation.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite its wide acceptance, the elevation of self-actualization as the highest human good raises a fundamental philosophical problem. Maslow's hierarchy is designed to explain *motivation*, not to offer a comprehensive account of *the good life*. Yet self-actualization is frequently treated not merely as a motivational stage but as a normative ideal of human fulfilment. Critical analyses of Maslow's pyramid note that this shift from descriptive psychology to implicit moral valuation is philosophically problematic.<sup>iii</sup> When self-actualization is treated as the highest good, human fulfilment becomes narrowly defined as an individual psychological achievement, detached from deeper questions of destiny, moral obligation, and ontological purpose.

This difficulty becomes more evidenced when Maslow's theory is examined across cultures most especially African cultures. Several studies revisiting Maslow's hierarchy acknowledge that the model reflects assumptions rooted in Western individualism, particularly the emphasis on autonomy, self-expression, and personal achievement.<sup>iv</sup> Even Maslow's later attempt to extend the hierarchy through the notion of self-transcendence does not fully escape this limitation. While self-transcendence gestures beyond the ego, it remains framed as a higher psychological state that emerges after personal needs are satisfied, rather than as an ontological orientation intrinsic to human existence.<sup>v</sup> As

a result, the question remains unresolved: *is self-actualization truly the highest human good, or merely the highest psychological achievement within a particular cultural framework?*

Igbo philosophy offers a radically different perspective on this question. Within Igbo ontology, the human person is not defined primarily by psychological fulfilment but by metaphysical constitution involving selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral becoming, and communal responsibility. Fulfilment, from this perspective, is not exhausted by personal creativity or autonomy but is understood as alignment with ontological purpose and communal harmony.<sup>vi</sup> The highest human good, therefore, cannot be reduced to self-actualization, since individual self-realization alone does not guarantee harmony with destiny, moral order, or the community.

The problem this research addresses is the uncritical elevation of self-actualization to the status of the highest human good within Maslow's pyramid. While Maslow's concept explains important dimensions of personal growth, it lacks the ontological depth required to ground a comprehensive account of human flourishing. Analysing Maslow's notion of self-actualization in critical dialogue with Igbo ontology of personhood, this work argues that self-actualization is insufficient as the highest human good. Instead, it proposes an Igbo ontological critique that redefines the highest good as *ontological fulfilment*, achieved through the integration of being, destiny, moral responsibility, and communal life. Indigenous metaphysical systems provide alternative standards for evaluating human flourishing.<sup>vii</sup> This critique not only exposes the philosophical limits of Maslow's pyramid but also demonstrates how Igbo philosophy contributes a richer, culturally grounded account of human living.

### **Self-Actualization and the Assumption of the Highest Human Good**

Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization occupies the highest position and is frequently interpreted as the ultimate aim of human life. In Maslow's original formulation, self-actualization refers to the realization of one's inherent potentials, capacities, and talents after the satisfaction of lower deficiency needs.<sup>viii</sup> Although Maslow initially presented this concept as a psychological description of motivation, subsequent interpretations have increasingly treated self-actualization as a normative ideal of human fulfilment. As a result, what began as an explanatory model of motivation gradually assumed the status of a theory of the highest human good. Even in its highest form, self-actualization remains centered on individual experiential fulfilment.<sup>ix</sup>

This elevation of self-actualization rests on the assumption that the fulfilment of human life is primarily an *individual psychological achievement*. Analyses of Maslow's hierarchy emphasize autonomy, creativity, authenticity, and personal growth as defining features of self-actualized individuals.<sup>x</sup> Fulfilment is thus conceptualized as inward realization rather than as alignment with metaphysical purpose or communal obligation. The highest good becomes the successful expression of the self's inner capacities, reinforcing an individual-centered conception of human flourishing. Indigenous systems emphasize relational and ontological stability over personal achievement.<sup>xi</sup>

Critical studies of Maslow's theory point out that this assumption reflects the broader orientation of humanistic psychology. Humanistic approaches emphasize subjective experience, personal meaning, and self-directed growth, often presenting these values as universally applicable.<sup>xii</sup> Within this framework, self-actualization is implicitly privileged over other possible ends of human existence, such as moral responsibility, destiny, or communal harmony. Consequently, the hierarchy suggests that once an individual achieves self-actualization, no higher form of fulfilment remains to be pursued.

Later revisions of Maslow's hierarchy attempted to address this limitation through the introduction of self-transcendence. Maslow's later writings describe self-transcendence as a motivational level in which individuals move beyond personal fulfilment toward higher values, service, or peak experiences.<sup>xiii</sup> However, critical reconstructions of this revision argue that self-transcendence remains conceptually dependent on self-actualization. It is presented as an extension of personal growth rather than as a fundamentally different conception of the human good. The underlying assumption that fulfilment is achieved through psychological progression therefore remains intact.

Empirical and theoretical critiques further challenge the identification of self-actualization with the highest human good. Studies examining the relationship between deficiency needs and growth needs show that individuals may exhibit creativity, commitment, and moral concern even when self-actualization is incomplete or unstable.<sup>xiv</sup> Moreover, applications of Maslow's theory in social and developmental contexts reveal that self-actualization does

not necessarily result in moral excellence, communal responsibility, or existential meaning.<sup>xv</sup> These findings weaken the claim that self-actualization represents the culmination of human fulfilment.

The assumption that self-actualization is the highest human good thus emerges not as a necessary conclusion of Maslow's theory but as a philosophical extrapolation shaped by individualistic and psychological priorities. While self-actualization explains important dimensions of human growth, it does not exhaust the meaning of fulfilment. Treating it as the highest good risks narrowing human flourishing to personal achievement and interior satisfaction. This conceptual limitation gives way for an ontological critique- one that questions whether the highest human good can be adequately defined without reference to being, destiny, moral order, and communal life. This critique is grounded on Igbo ontology.

### **Psychological Individualism and the Limits of Self-Actualization**

A central feature underlying Maslow's conception of self-actualization is *psychological individualism* that is, the assumption that fulfilment is primarily an internal, subjective achievement realized within the individual psyche. In Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualization is described as the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, and potentials, emphasizing personal creativity, autonomy, and self-expression.<sup>xvi</sup> Although this structure succeeds in highlighting important dimensions of human growth, it structures fulfilment almost exclusively in terms of inward realization, thereby marginalizing broader ontological and communal dimensions of human existence.

Critical analyses of Maslow's theory argue that this individualistic orientation is not accidental but reflects the ideological foundations of humanistic psychology. Studies tracing the socio-historical roots of Maslow's thought show that self-actualization emerges from a liberal-humanist worldview that prioritizes individual freedom, self-determination, and personal meaning.<sup>xvii</sup> Within this worldview, the self becomes the primary site of value realization, and fulfilment is measured by the extent to which the individual experiences psychological satisfaction and authenticity. As a result, the highest human good is implicitly equated with the successful management and expression of one's inner life.

This psychological individualism generates significant conceptual limitations. First, it abstracts the individual from enduring metaphysical questions concerning destiny, purpose, and being. While Maslow acknowledges values, peak experiences, and transcendence, these are still interpreted as subjective psychological states rather than as responses to an objective ontological order.<sup>xviii</sup> Fulfilment remains experiential rather than existential. Consequently, the theory struggles to explain why self-actualization should count as the *highest* good rather than merely a desirable psychological condition.

Second, individualism weakens the moral dimension of fulfilment. Empirical investigations into deficiency and growth needs reveal that self-actualization does not necessarily correlate with moral responsibility or ethical commitment.<sup>xix</sup> Individuals may exhibit creativity, autonomy, and self-expression while remaining morally indifferent or socially detached. Applications of Maslow's theory in organizational and developmental contexts further demonstrate that self-actualization can coexist with self-centeredness, competition, and value fragmentation.<sup>xx</sup> These findings challenge the assumption that psychological growth naturally culminates in moral or communal excellence.

Attempts to correct this limitation through Maslow's later introduction of self-transcendence do not fully resolve the problem. Although self-transcendence gestures beyond the individual ego, it remains conceptually dependent on self-actualization and is still framed as a higher psychological motivation that emerges after personal needs are satisfied.<sup>xxi</sup> Critical reconstructions of the pyramid note that transcendence is treated as an extension of individual fulfilment rather than as a fundamentally different conception of the human good. Thus, even at its highest point, the hierarchy remains anchored in psychological individualism.

Further critiques emphasize that psychological individualism limits the cross-cultural validity of self-actualization as a universal highest good. Studies applying Maslow's theory across social, economic, and cultural contexts show that individuals may prioritize communal responsibility, moral duty, or existential meaning over personal self-expression.<sup>xxii</sup> In such contexts, fulfilment is not primarily experienced as self-actualization but as participation in shared values and alignment with broader structures of meaning. This suggests that self-actualization reflects a culturally specific ideal rather than a universally adequate account of the highest human good.

The persistence of psychological individualism within Maslow's architecture thus exposes a fundamental limitation: self-actualization explains personal growth but fails to account for fulfilment as a comprehensive, morally grounded, and ontologically meaningful condition of human existence. By locating the highest good within the interior life of the individual, the theory overlooks dimensions of fulfilment that transcend psychological satisfaction. This limitation opens the way for an ontological critique grounded in Igbo philosophy, where fulfilment is understood not as the perfection of the isolated self but as alignment with being, destiny, moral order, and community. What then is the Igbo ontological alternative to psychological individualism?

### **Igbo Ontological Conception of the Highest Human Good**

Igbo philosophy approaches the question of the highest human good from an ontological rather than a psychological standpoint. Unlike Maslow's system, which locates the highest good in the attainment of self-actualization as a motivational state, Igbo ontology grounds human fulfilment in the metaphysical constitution and orientation of the person. In this tradition, the highest human good is not the perfection of individual capacities but the realization of being in harmony with destiny, moral order, and communal life. Fulfilment is thus understood as *ontological fulfilment*, not as psychological completion. In Igbo metaphysics, the highest human good is inseparable from moral alignment and metaphysical harmony.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Central to this conception is the Igbo understanding of the human person as *mmadu*. Philosophical analyses of Igbo ontology emphasize that *mmadu* denotes the total reality of the human being, encompassing physical existence, spiritual depth, moral responsibility, and relational embeddedness.<sup>xxiv</sup> Personhood is not a status achieved through performance or success but an ontological given that precedes all psychological striving. Consequently, the highest human good cannot be something merely *attained* (such as self-actualization) but something *realized* through the proper alignment of one's being with its metaphysical structure.

The notion of *onwe* further clarifies this ontological orientation. *Onwe* refers to the metaphysical core of selfhood that grounds individuality and personal identity. Okpalike's exposition of Igbo self-personhood shows that *onwe* is neither a social construct nor a psychological artifact but an ontological reality that enables moral agency, responsibility, and meaningful existence.<sup>xxv</sup> The highest human good, from this perspective, is not the expression of inner talents for their own sake but the integrity of selfhood lived in accordance with ontological purpose. A life may be creative and autonomous yet remain unfulfilled if it lacks this ontological coherence.

Destiny (*chi*) occupies a central place in defining the highest human good within Igbo thought. Igbo philosophical studies consistently interpret *chi* as a personal metaphysical principle that individualizes the person and situates life within a meaningful cosmic order.<sup>xxvi</sup> Fulfilment, therefore, involves living in harmony with one's *chi* through moral effort, responsibility, and perseverance. Unlike Maslow's self-actualization, which is largely self-referential, fulfilment in Igbo ontology is *destiny-oriented*. The highest good is achieved not by maximizing personal satisfaction but by actualizing one's ontological calling within the limits and possibilities of existence.

Moral becoming is integral to this conception of fulfilment but does not constitute personhood itself. Researches on Igbo personhood emphasize that moral excellence is an expression of fulfilled being rather than its foundation.<sup>xxvii</sup> A person may fail morally without ceasing to be a person, yet persistent moral disorder signifies a failure to attain ontological fulfilment. The highest human good, therefore, involves moral alignment with the ontological order, not merely the possession of psychological well-being or creative freedom.

Communal life further completes the Igbo conception of the highest human good. Igbo philosophy does not oppose individuality to community; rather, it understands community as the space in which ontological fulfilment is recognized and sustained. Analyses of *akonauche* and social order in Igbo culture show that fulfilled personhood manifests in responsible participation in communal life, where individual destiny and collective harmony are mutually reinforcing.<sup>xxviii</sup> Communal recognition does not create fulfilment, but it affirms the successful realization of ontological purpose.

These elements (*mmadu*, *onwe*, *chi*, moral becoming, and communal affirmation) taken together define the highest human good in Igbo philosophy as *ontological fulfilment*. This fulfilment surpasses self-actualization by integrating being, destiny, morality, and community into a unified conception of human flourishing. From this philosophical angle, self-actualization may be a valuable aspect of human development, but it cannot be the highest good. The

highest good is not the actualization of the self alone, but the fulfilment of the person as a being situated within a metaphysical and moral order. This Igbo ontological vision provides a decisive critique of Maslow's pyramid and prepares the ground for the concluding reconstruction of human value beyond psychological individualism. Communal authorization and ritual discipline sustain this conception of the good within lived experience.<sup>xxix</sup>

### Conclusion

This research has critically examined the assumption, prevalent in humanistic psychology, that self-actualization constitutes the highest human good. By analyzing Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its underlying commitment to psychological individualism, the research has philosophically shown that self-actualization, while valuable as a description of personal growth and creativity, lacks the ontological depth required to function as an ultimate account of human fulfilment. Treated as the apex of the motivational pyramid, self-actualization implicitly elevates individual psychological satisfaction to the status of the highest good, thereby narrowing human flourishing to interior realization and personal achievement.

The critical analysis further demonstrated that this elevation is not an inevitable implication of Maslow's motivational theory but a philosophical extrapolation shaped by the values of humanistic psychology. Even Maslow's later introduction of self-transcendence does not fully overcome this limitation, since transcendence remains framed as a higher psychological state emerging from fulfilled personal needs rather than as an ontological orientation intrinsic to human existence. As a result, Maslow's pyramid remains conceptually confined within the logic of psychological motivation and individual fulfilment.

Contrary to this view, Igbo ontology offers a more comprehensive and philosophically integrative account of the highest human good. By grounding fulfilment in the metaphysical constitution of the person, Igbo philosophy reconceives the highest good as ontological fulfilment, that is, an alignment of selfhood (*onwe*), destiny (*chi*), moral responsibility, and communal life. Fulfilment, in this paradigm, is not achieved by maximizing personal satisfaction or expressive freedom but by realizing one's being in harmony with ontological purpose and moral order. An ontologically grounded account of the highest good provides a more inclusive framework for global ethics.<sup>xxx</sup> Self-actualization, while not rejected, is re-situated as a limited aspect of human development rather than its ultimate end.

This Igbo ontological critique exposes the inadequacy of defining the highest human good in purely psychological terms. It shows that creativity, autonomy, and inner satisfaction, though important, do not exhaust the meaning of fulfilled human existence. A person may be psychologically actualized yet ontologically unfulfilled if life is disconnected from destiny, moral coherence, and communal responsibility. The highest human good, therefore, cannot be reduced to self-realization alone but must involve the fulfilment of being itself.

In conclusion, the research has argued that self-actualization is not the highest human good. Critically analysing Maslow's pyramid with Igbo ontology of personhood, it has demonstrated the need to move beyond psychological individualism towards an ontological conception of fulfilment. This shift not only challenges dominant assumptions within humanistic psychology but also affirms the capacity of African philosophy (particularly Igbo thought) to contribute theory-generative insights to global discussions on value and the meaning of the good life.

### Endnotes

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