

THE ONTOLOGY OF HUMAN FULFILLMENT: KAROL WOJTYLA'S METAPHYSICAL INSIGHTS ON EUDAIMONIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the metaphysical foundations of human fulfillment through Karol Wojtyla's personalistic philosophy, situating his insights within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In Aristotle's perspective, the ultimate goal and purpose of human existence is happiness. Since this is the pinnacle of our capacity for reason, it necessitates intellectual reflection. Therefore, an activity of the soul in accordance with a rational principle is the proper essence of man. In contrast, Aquinas asserts that happiness is an objective state of existence that satisfies human nature rather than just a subjective emotion. He highlights that all human efforts are ultimately focused on achieving happiness. According to Thomas Aquinas, true happiness is found in the possession of God, which is the highest good. Wojtyla enriches classical accounts of eudaimonia by accentuating the dynamic relation between person and action, and the moral orientation toward the good. When performing an action the person fulfills himself also from the ontological point of view. His fulfillment is based on self-determinism. Freedom carries within itself the surrender to truth which is brought into prominence in man's conscience. The function of conscience consists in distinguishing the element of moral good and in releasing and forming a sense of duty with respect to this good. While Aristotle and Aquinas conceive happiness as the ultimate end of human striving, Wojtyla advances this framework by integrating freedom, conscience, and personal responsibility into the ontology of fulfillment. The paper argues that the appropriate understanding of happiness is not reducible to subjective satisfaction but constitutes the full actualization of rational nature through morally good action.

Keywords: Happiness, Wojtyla, Fulfillment, Metaphysics, Aristotle, Aquinas, Personalism

INTRODUCTION

The question of happiness has been a perennial concern in philosophy, occupying a central place in ethical and metaphysical inquiry from antiquity to the present. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* famously defines happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the highest good, the end toward which all human actions are directed (Aristotle 1984, 1182b1). For Aristotle, happiness is not reducible to pleasure or wealth but consists in the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. This teleological conception of human existence situates happiness as the culmination of rational activity and moral excellence. Aquinas, building upon Aristotelian foundations, integrates this account into a Christian metaphysical framework. In the *Summa Theologica*, he distinguishes between imperfect happiness attainable in earthly life and perfect happiness realized in the beatific vision (Aquinas 1975, I-II, q.3). Aquinas thereby postulated both the metaphysical and theological dimensions of

fulfillment, grounding happiness in the perfection of rational nature while orienting it toward divine union.

The human being is no longer conceived merely as a rational animal striving toward objective goods, but as a moral agent whose dignity lies in freedom and responsibility. According to Wojtyła, if man as a person is the one who governs and possesses himself, then he can do so also because he is responsible for himself and he is in some respects responsible to himself. Consequently, a diminished responsibility is equivalent to a diminution of personality (Wojtyła, 1979, 173). This shift raises pressing questions: how can happiness be reconciled with autonomy? Is fulfillment merely subjective satisfaction, or does it retain an objective metaphysical grounding? These questions form the backdrop against which Karol Wojtyła, develops his personalist philosophy. The transcendence of the person in the action does not consist solely either in the ontological autonomy, or self-centered dependence on the ego. It includes also the indispensable and essential moment of reference to truth and it is this moment that ultimately determines freedom (Wojtyła, 1979, 154).

In the *Acting Person*, Wojtyła reveals the dependence on a specific mode of ‘truth,’ as we express it in a colloquial way, inherent in the freedom of man. The dependence is the basis for the self-dependence of the person, that is to say, for freedom in the fundamental sense of auto-determination (Wojtyła, 1979, 154). Wojtyła’s contribution is significant because it bridges two traditions often seen as divergent: classical metaphysics, which emphasizes objective structures of being, and modern personalism, which highlights subjectivity, freedom, and self-determination. He argues that fulfillment must be understood as both ontological perfection and existential self-realization. Happiness, in his account, is not simply the possession of goods or the satisfaction of desires, but the full actualization of rational nature through morally good action. It is conscience that reveals the dependence on a specific mode of ‘truth’ as we express it in a colloquial way, inherently in the freedom of man.

According to Acosta and Reimers (2016) Wojtyła’s synthesis provides a unique framework for understanding the human person as both metaphysical being and moral subject. Furthermore, Taylor (2009–2010) postulated that Wojtyła’s insistence on the “truth of the good” situates happiness within a horizon of objective value, resisting reduction to mere subjectivism. The paper seeks to explore Wojtyła’s metaphysical insights on happiness, situating them within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and highlighting their personalist reinterpretation. The central thesis is that happiness, conceived as the ultimate end of human existence, must be understood as the ontological fulfillment of rational nature achieved through self-determined moral action. It demonstrates that the pursuit of happiness is not merely a psychological inclination but a metaphysical orientation toward the fullness of being, realized in the moral life of the person.

ARISTOTELIAN FOUNDATION OF HAPPINESS

Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* argues that every action and pursuit aims at some good, and that the highest good is that which is sought for its own sake rather than as a means to something else (Aristotle 1984, 1182b1). This teleological framework situates happiness as the ultimate end

of human life, the goal toward which all desires and activities are ordered. Unlike transient pleasures or external goods, happiness is complete and self-sufficient, leaving nothing further to be desired (Aristotle 1984, 1184a1).

Aristotle distinguishes between different kinds of goods: *bonum honestum* (intrinsic goods), *bonum utile* (instrumental goods), and *bonum delectabile* (pleasurable goods). While health, wealth, and fortune may be considered goods, they are ultimately subordinate to happiness, which is an end in itself rather than a means (Aquinas 1975, 35). This distinction is crucial because it prevents the reduction of happiness to mere utility or pleasure. For Aristotle, happiness is not simply the accumulation of desirable states but the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle 1984, 1185a1).

The teleological orientation of human action implies that every pursuit is intelligible only in relation to its end. For example, medicine aims at health, shipbuilding at navigation, and military strategy at victory. Yet above these particular ends lies the supreme end, happiness, which provides the ultimate rationale for all subordinate activities (Aristotle 1984, 1184a1). This hierarchical ordering of goods reflects Aristotle's broader metaphysical commitment to the principle of final causality: every being and every action is directed toward some *telos*, or end. Happiness, as the highest *telos*, functions as the final cause of human life.

Furthermore, Aristotle emphasizes that happiness must be understood in terms of activity rather than possession. To have sight, for instance, is less significant than to use sight; similarly, to possess virtue is less important than to exercise it (Aristotle 1984, 1185a1). Happiness, therefore, is not a static state but a dynamic activity, realized through the continual practice of virtue. This insight prevents the conception of happiness as a passive condition and instead situates it within the lived experience of moral and intellectual excellence.

Moreover, Virtue (*aretē*) plays a central role in Aristotle's account of happiness. He distinguishes between moral virtues, such as courage and temperance, and intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding (Aristotle 1984, 1184b1). Moral virtues regulate desires and emotions, aligning them with reason, while intellectual virtues perfect the rational faculty itself. Happiness, as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, thus requires the cultivation of both moral and intellectual excellences. The highest form of happiness, Aristotle postulated, is found in the contemplative life, which exercises the intellect in its purest and most divine capacity (Aristotle 1984, 1177a12).

THOMISTIC METAPHYSICAL CLARIFICATION

Thomas Aquinas inherits Aristotle's teleological framework but reinterprets it within a Christian metaphysical and theological horizon. For Aquinas, happiness (*beatitudo*) is the ultimate end of human life, but it must be understood in both natural and supernatural dimensions. In the *Summa Theologica*, he distinguishes between imperfect happiness, attainable in this life through virtuous activity, and perfect happiness, realized only in the beatific vision of God (Aquinas 1975, I-II, q.3).

This distinction reflects Aquinas's conviction that human fulfillment cannot be exhausted by earthly goods but requires union with the divine as the consummation of rational nature.

Aquinas begins by affirming Aristotle's principle that every agent acts for an end, and that the highest end must be a complete and self-sufficient good (Aristotle 1984, 1184a1; Aquinas 2012, 198). Moreover, Aquinas expands this framework by situating the human desire for happiness within the metaphysical structure of creation. According to Aquinas, the human will necessarily tends toward happiness and cannot not desire it (Aquinas 2012, 201). This inclination is rooted in the very nature of rational beings, whose appetite is directed toward the good as such. Thus, happiness is not merely a contingent desire but the necessary orientation of human nature.

Aquinas distinguishes between the objective and subjective dimensions of happiness. Objectively, happiness consists in the perfection of rational nature, the full actualization of the faculties of intellect and will. Subjectively, happiness is experienced as the possession of the good by the individual person (Aquinas 2012, 198). This duality allows Aquinas to preserve the metaphysical grounding of happiness while acknowledging its existential realization in the concrete life of the subject. A rational being that is not perfect by the measure of its species and individuality cannot be objectively happy, yet happiness must also be conceived as a property of a definite subject, not merely an abstract state.

In Aquinas view, the central account is the distinction between natural and supernatural ends. Natural happiness, attainable through the exercise of virtue and contemplation, corresponds to Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*. However, Aquinas insists that the ultimate fulfillment of human nature transcends natural capacities and requires divine grace. Perfect happiness, therefore, is found only in the vision of God, which alone satisfies the infinite desire of the human will (Aquinas 1975, 35). This theological dimension does not negate the natural pursuit of happiness but situates it within a broader metaphysical horizon.

Accordingly, Aquinas also elaborates on the hierarchy of goods. Following Aristotle, he distinguishes between *bonum honestum* (intrinsic goods), *bonum utile* (instrumental goods), and *bonum delectabile* (pleasurable goods). However, he emphasizes that only *bonum honestum* can serve as the foundation of true happiness, since it corresponds to the perfection of rational nature (Aquinas 2012, 202). Instrumental and pleasurable goods may contribute to happiness, but they are subordinate to the intrinsic good of virtue and ultimately to the supernatural good of divine union. This hierarchy prevents the reduction of happiness to subjective satisfaction and grounds it in objective metaphysical reality.

Conscience and synderesis play a crucial role in Aquinas's ethical account of happiness. According to Aquinas, synderesis is the innate principle that "good must be done and evil avoided." In addition, the will directs toward the good, while conscience applies this principle to particular actions (Aquinas 2012, 210). Happiness, therefore, is achieved through actions that conform to the truth of the good, guided by conscience. Actions contrary to conscience diminish fulfillment, while virtuous actions actualize the person's moral and metaphysical potential. This ethical dimension describes the inseparability of happiness and morality in Aquinas's thought.

According to Davies and Stump (2012), Aquinas's account of happiness is both metaphysical and theological, uniting natural philosophy with revealed doctrine. Moreover, Hoffmann (2012) postulated the role of conscience and synderesis in directing the will toward the good, thereby linking ethical action with metaphysical fulfillment. These interpretations underscore the richness of Aquinas's synthesis, which preserves the insights of Aristotle while extending them into a theological horizon. Consequently, for Aquinas, happiness is defined as; (1) the necessary orientation of the human will; (2) happiness has both objective and subjective dimensions, consisting in the perfection of rational nature and its possession by the individual; (3) happiness requires virtue and is grounded in *bonum honestum*; (4) conscience and synderesis direct the will toward the good, ensuring that happiness is inseparable from morality; (5) external goods contribute to but do not constitute happiness; and (6) perfect happiness transcends natural capacities and is realized only in the vision of God. These principles provide the metaphysical and theological foundation upon which Wojtyla builds his personalist reinterpretation of fulfillment.

Aquinas's account also acknowledges the role of external goods, though he insists they are not sufficient for happiness. Health, wealth, and friendship may contribute to human flourishing, but they cannot constitute happiness itself (Aquinas 2012, 198). True happiness requires the perfection of the soul, not merely favorable external conditions. This claim reflects Aquinas's conviction that happiness is primarily an interior reality, grounded in the rational faculties and their orientation toward the good. The distinction between imperfect and perfect happiness has profound implications. Imperfect happiness, attainable through virtue and contemplation, provides genuine fulfillment but remains incomplete, since the human will desires an infinite good that cannot be satisfied by finite realities (Aquinas 1975, 35). Perfect happiness, realized in the beatific vision, alone fulfills this infinite desire. In this way, Aquinas integrates Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* with Christian theology, situating human fulfillment within the metaphysical structure of creation and redemption.

WOJTYLA'S PERSONALIST REINTERPRETATION

Aristotle and Aquinas conceive happiness primarily in terms of objective perfection: the full actualization of rational nature (Aristotle 1984, 1184a1; Aquinas 1975, 35). Wojtyla accepts this framework but insists that it must be complemented by the subjective experience of fulfillment. Happiness is not merely the possession of objective goods but the realization of personal dignity through self-determined action (Wojtyla 1979, 151). This reinterpretation shifts the focus from metaphysical abstraction to existential concreteness, highlighting the dynamic correlation between being and action. However, there is no division between what is inside and what makes up the exteriority since Wojtyla's conception of the "I" differs greatly from Cartesian *res cogitans*, i.e., it is not an extra-worldly subject. As a result, any interaction—both cognitive and experiential—with the latter directly affects the former. Modern phenomenology and cognitive sciences support Wojtyla's assertion that exterior experience is inextricably linked to internal experience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). According to the realistic viewpoint, the "I" has an independent existence and is neither a projection nor a derivation of any other reality. Wojtyla believes that "subjectivity is something that exists objectively in the world" (Merecki, 2015, 37). It can be regarded as a reality

that participates in the ontological multiplicity of the world since it possesses a variety of powers, including intellectual and volitional ones.

According to Wojtyla, happiness cannot be imposed externally but must be realized through free choice. The will, oriented toward the good, achieves fulfillment only when it freely chooses actions that conform to the truth of the good (Heale 2013). This claim resonates with Kant's emphasis on autonomy but remains grounded in a realist metaphysics that acknowledges objective values. Wojtyla thus reinterprets Aristotle's teleology and Aquinas's metaphysical perfection by situating them within the horizon of freedom and responsibility.

However, Conscience mediates between freedom and truth in Wojtyla's account. Guided by synderesis, the innate principle that "good must be done and evil avoided"—conscience directs the person toward authentic values (Aquinas 2012, 210). Happiness, therefore, is achieved not by arbitrary choice but by choices that conform to the truth of the good (John Paul II 1993, no. 59–60). Wojtyla reinterprets Aquinas's account of conscience by emphasizing its existential significance: conscience is not merely a cognitive faculty but the arena in which freedom and truth converge to shape personal identity.

In *Person and Act*, Wojtyla argues that the human person fulfills himself through action. Action is not merely an external effect but an internal, intransitive reality that shapes the moral identity of the agent (Wojtyla 1994, 151). Each act contributes to the person's self-realization, actualizing the potentialities inherent in rational nature. This emphasis on action distinguishes Wojtyla's account from purely contemplative models of happiness. While Aristotle privileges contemplation as the highest activity (Aristotle 1984, 1177a12), Wojtyla insists that moral action, grounded in freedom and conscience, is equally central to fulfillment.

THE ONTOLOGY OF FULFILLMENT IN WOJTYLA

The human person through the element of self-determination is revealed to itself not only as self-possession and self-governance but also as a tendency toward self-fulfillment (Wojtyla 1993). The person, therefore, does not only determine himself but also fulfills himself in and through action. According to Wojtyla, for being the performer of an action, man also fulfills himself. To fulfill oneself means to actualize, and in a way to bring to the proper fullness, that structure in man which is characteristic of him because of his personality and also because of his being somebody and not merely something; it is the structure of self-governance and self-possession (Wojtyla 1979). This only goes to show that although the person is an actual being in the metaphysical sense, he is still a being in potency towards the fuller realization of himself through action.

Furthermore, "to fulfill" and "to perform" are nearly interchangeable because each performance of an action results in fulfillment. Because of this, fulfillment appears to be the best counterpart of the verb "to act," (Wojtyla, 1979, p. 153) signifying the fullness that corresponds to a certain potentiality or capability. According to the ontological viewpoint, man fulfills himself each time he acts and concretizes positive moral virtualities, demonstrating that humans are potential beings rather than completely realized beings. There would be absolutely no chance of actualization if the

human being were thought of as a "pure consciousness" made up of a series of actions. But it becomes clear that they are more than just a manifestation of awareness; they are a reality that exists independently of consciousness. Morality demonstrates a certain ontological transitoriness or contingency of the human actual being: man is a contingent being since the individual acts and fulfills himself in and through action. Every entity that is subject to actualization and must work toward achieving its own totality appears to be contingent (Wojtyla, 1979).

Moreover, the fact that work is a voluntary activity that incorporates man's self-fulfillment is one of the strongest arguments against the separation of man and job. According to Wojtyla, a person's transcendence is achieved through his action, and self-determination genuinely exists in the act of behaving in a way that is right for him (Wojtyla, 1979). Every man on the planet works or participates in activities in order to achieve or accomplish a goal. Work does, in fact, contribute to the improvement of the individual performing it. This means that, for work to be a specifically human activity that accords with the dignity of the human person, it must not only seek to achieve some external objective but must also contribute to the self-fulfillment of the individual (Lombo & Russo, 2017). Furthermore, because man becomes more fully himself via labor that is freely undertaken and executed, the fulfillment that comes from work is a true reflection of his self-fulfillment. But this self-fulfillment encompasses more than just performing an act; it also subtly incorporates moral principles. In this way, carrying out an act is one thing; carrying out an act in an effort to find fulfillment is quite another. In the latter, doing what is morally just is the goal, and doing so is unquestionably more satisfying.

Wojtyla correlates fulfillment with felicity, though he distinguishes between them. Felicity refers to the subjective experience of happiness, while fulfillment denotes the ontological actualization of the person (Wojtyla 1979, 151). The two are closely related: morally good action produces both ontological fulfillment and subjective felicity. Yet Wojtyla cautions against reducing happiness to mere subjective feeling. True fulfillment requires conformity to the truth of the good, not simply the satisfaction of desires (Taylor 2009–2010). In this way, Wojtyla preserves the objectivity of happiness while acknowledging its subjective dimension.

In any case, the completion, which ontologically relates to the person's constitution itself, can only be attained within the individual. By carrying out the activity and achieving his proper plenitude or fullness, which in its structure essentially adheres to the structural condition of self-governance and self-possession, the individual finds fulfillment. By becoming "somebody" in his manifestation of himself, the individual accomplishes his own goals in the deed (Wojtyla, 1979). Wojtyla's ontology of fulfillment integrates classical metaphysics with modern personalism. From Aristotle, he inherits the conviction that happiness is the ultimate end of human life, grounded in the perfection of rational nature (Aristotle 1984, 1184a1). From Aquinas, he adopts the distinction between objective and subjective dimensions of happiness, as well as the theological orientation toward perfect beatitude (Aquinas 1975, 35). Yet Wojtyla reinterprets these insights through the lens of personalism, emphasizing freedom, conscience, and relationality. His account thus preserves the metaphysical depth of classical philosophy while responding to contemporary concerns about autonomy and dignity.

CONCLUSION

Wojtyla's approach to happiness is conceived as the ultimate end of human existence which is both metaphysical and personal. Wojtyla's synthesis of Aristotelian-Thomistic thought with personalism demonstrates that fulfillment is achieved through morally good action, grounded in the truth of the good and actualized in freedom. The performing of an action is coordinated with self-determination through the fulfillment it provides. To fulfill oneself; is to actualize and, in a sense, provide the correct fullness to the structure that characterizes man. This is because of his personality and the fact that he is somebody rather than just something. It is the form of self-governance and self-possession. Happiness within the ontology of self-determination enriches the philosophical discourse on eudaimonia. This offers a framework that unites classical metaphysics with modern concerns for personal dignity and autonomy.

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