

# The Fulfillment Problem

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Can humans find ultimate satisfaction? If so, how do they find it? The question of fulfillment has challenged generation after generation, prompting the great thinkers of Western Civilization to respond and engage in one universal and timeless discussion. This paper addresses only two such answers that lie on opposite sides of the spectrum of thought: Aristotle's explanation and Thomas Hobbes's response to Aristotle. For the former, fulfillment is within human grasp; for the latter, it is a disillusioned dream. Yet, while both writers voice truth in their responses, both are overlooking the complete picture. Aristotle correctly determines that humanity was designed with an end in mind, while Hobbes correctly identifies the effects of man's fallen nature. But the Christian perspective paints the entire portrait of humanity—that humanity was designed for an end but, in its fallen state, seeks other unfulfilling ends.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle provides, in a sense, a “handbook” on fulfillment, in which he explains human nature, human action, how their actions can be used to fulfill themselves, and precisely what their fulfillment will be. He observes that humans are like animals because both share sense perception (Aristotle 1098a). However, humans are superior to animals since the human being alone has reason<sup>1</sup> and an immaterial soul (Aristotle 1098a). Furthermore, in his *Politics*, he claims that “man, by nature is a social animal” (*Politics*, 1253a) and, less explicitly, conveys the same concept in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “it [friendship] is most

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<sup>1</sup> The actual word is *λόγος*, which can have several more definitions besides “reason,” such as “narrative,” “deliberation,” and “reckoning.”

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necessary for our life. For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods” (Aristotle 1155a). For Aristotle, humans are *naturally inclined* to form relationships, for “every human being is akin and beloved to a human being” (Aristotle 1155a). Hence, according to the philosopher, one aspect of human nature is the desire to be communal.

Human nature involves another sense as well, a desire to pursue the good (Aristotle 1094a). Aristotle defines the good as an objective idea but writes that many do not have this good in mind when they act. Rather, humans only act of their knowledge—what they believe is good—which may or may not align with the objective good. Therefore, another aspect of human nature is the desire to act in the pursuit of the good.

Given these two aspects of human nature, what then constitutes human fulfillment? Aristotle notes that, just as our members have ends, so does our nature seek some end as well (Aristotle 1097b). For Aristotle, all things were designed with an end in mind, which is the distinction between a meaningful and meaningless world: a meaningful world was *designed*, not simply brought into existence. Moreover, not all ends are equally important. An animal’s end, for instance, is merely survival and reproduction. Humans also have this end, but since humans are unique animals—rational animals with a spiritual component—they have a special end above simple reproduction. This end, as it turns out, is happiness, which Aristotle concludes as the highest good, for men seek happiness for no other reason than to be happy (Aristotle 1097b). Furthermore, humans seek friendship to be happy because friendship leads to community, which satisfies man’s natural desire for communion. But man needs more than just friendship to find happiness.

To experience happiness, humans must also live a life of virtue—that is, live a life balanced between two extremes of action, the excessive and the deficient (Aristotle 1098a). This

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balance takes experience and practice to achieve, just as it takes the experience of an expert archer to sink the arrow into the middle of a target consistently (Aristotle 1107a). Therefore, virtue is a life-long task, a constant balancing between two extremes until virtuous habit is formed. Thus, Aristotle concludes that a fulfilling life is about intentionally acting virtuously to live happily in one's community (Aristotle 1102a).<sup>2</sup>

Hobbes also explores the same aspects of humanity in the *Leviathan*—their natures, actions, desires, and ends—but he rejects nearly all Aristotle's conclusions about humanity. On one point he agrees, however: humans are rational animals, although humans are not so special as Aristotle believed. Both humans and animals have Understanding, which is the imagination being stimulated by words or calls (Hobbes 93). (Essentially, humans understand these words and calls because their minds respond to them.) Man has a special capability of Understanding, however. His Understanding functions so that he can use speech (Hobbes 94). Through speech, man can Reckon, which is simply the process of using terms and definitions to reason to conclusions (Hobbes 111).

Hobbes also observes, like Aristotle, that the human mind is more complex than and superior to other animals' (Hobbes 99). But he asserts that man has no unique, immaterial soul; *he is entirely material*.<sup>3</sup> For Hobbes, all conceptions in the human mind stem from the experiences of the physical senses (Hobbes 85). Given that human beings decidedly have no spiritual element, no special design that distinguishes them from other animals, *there is no uniquely human end*.

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<sup>2</sup> A minor point, perhaps, but the enactment of several Aristotelian virtues requires one to engage with community.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes never explicitly states that all things are material; but in his attempts to prove that the mind is entirely physical, he demonstrates his belief in materialism.

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What, then, is the place of friendship and goodness in Hobbes's world? There is little place for friendship other than self-benefit. Humans are friendly until their wants conflict with another's; then, according to Hobbes, they become enemies (Hobbes 184). Furthermore, one acts based on one's desires, which arise from the imagination of his senses. And based on these desires, one has some good for himself in mind—much like Aristotle's concept of seeking good. However, in a purely material world, there is no objective good which governs all (Hobbes 118). Where there is no objective good, there can be no objective evil; and where there is no evil, there is no virtuous balance between evils—no virtue. For Hobbes, good and evil are simply what a man desires and what he hates (Hobbes 120).

What then do all humans seek? Hobbes claims that man was not designed to seek any specific end. He demonstrates this truth using Newton's first law of motion: an object in motion stays in motion. Simply, there is no change in motion unless something else forces change. Through this analogy, Hobbes denies the "natural end" of objects, such as a body falling to rest on the ground. There is a tendency for men, who cannot move eternally without resting eventually, to believe that all things must come to rest as they do (Hobbes 87). Hobbes believes this is Aristotle's error. Rather, he explains, the motion of man continues but in a different manner than before. (For example, a man watching a sunset can close his eyes and still picture the sunset; this is a continuance of motion.) Therefore, human nature has no special end since humans are like all other animals. In fact, in direct response to Aristotle, he claims their end is *specifically* not happiness, or the "perpetuall Tranquillity of mind" (Hobbes 130).

Even if man was not designed to seek any specific end, there is one thing all humans do seek: power. From this lust for power, the nature of man derives three qualities: competition, diffidence, and glory—man competes for resources, fights to protect himself, and battles for the

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recognition of his might (Hobbes 185). Hobbes's world is a power-driven and chaotic existence compared to the balance of Aristotle's "pleasant" life.

Fortunately, Christianity synthesizes and expands both these views to capture the complete portrait of human nature. Christianity's description of human nature is as simple as it is paradoxical. Man was made in the image of God—a communion of persons. Therefore, men are social creatures by nature, as Aristotle correctly observed. Furthermore, men have a divine aspect to their nature, an immortal soul. At one point, man had perfect control over his desires, passions, and will but lost this ability through the Fall. Here, Hobbes enters the scene.

Christianity provides a complicated and varied explanation of human action. Man always seeks happiness but, in his fallen state, cannot, without Divine assistance, find the true source of happiness: union with God. Therefore, he turns to other pleasures and desires to unsuccessfully satisfy this hunger for fulfillment, thus falling into evil. Sometimes, man even commits evil for the enjoyment of evil (Augustine II.iv.9). But to find authentic happiness, one must act virtuously. Indeed, good acts require virtue, which from one perspective is a paradox of extremes<sup>4</sup> and another, the Aristotelian balance between extremes. But only with the assistance of their Creator can they will and act virtuously for the good.

What, then, is Christian fulfillment? Man was not just created; man was *designed by God*. Therefore, man's fulfillment lies in union with his Creator. All men seek happiness, but happiness is only found when man seeks God through virtue—not simply through virtue alone as Aristotle concluded. But since man has sinned, this union is hard to gain, even impossible for man alone. If man does not seek God, then man cannot succeed in virtue; when this happens,

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<sup>4</sup> G. K. Chesterton describes Christian virtue as the "combining of furious opposites." Namely, Christianity calls the individual to act on one end of the spectrum for some contexts and on the other end for other situations (VI: "The Paradoxes of Christianity").

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man's fallen nature goads him to seek power, as Hobbes observes (though he says nothing of Original Sin). Christianity, therefore, provides the full answer to human fulfillment.

Aristotle had come too early, and Hobbes, in a sense, had come too late. Aristotle lived in a pre-Christian world of Ideas and Form, and Hobbes was immersed in a post-Christian world of scientific materialism which believed there was no longer a need for "spiritual superstitions." Nevertheless, both had correctly detailed some aspect of the human condition. Hobbes had correctly identified the fallen nature of man, while Aristotle accurately explored the ideal nature of man. But only Christianity enjoins these two conflicting views into the paradoxical truth of human nature and its fulfillment.

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