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The Cognitive Significance of African Traditional Metaphysics

Abstract

The paper examines the issue of African metaphysics which revolves round the conception of a vital force which the Africans take as the primary unifying stuff of the universe permeating all existing being, physical, quasi-physical or spiritual. The paper finds that this unifying force is significant or dynamic. The method of analysis is conceptual. The paper concludes that in African traditional metaphysics lies a fertile source of knowledge and values exploration that are essential in a changing world.

Keywords

Metaphysics, African, Vital Force, Cognitive Significance, Spirits, Tolerance and Ethics.

Introduction: Metaphysics and the Concept ‘African’

An attempt to explicate an African traditional metaphysics and its significance in the acquisition of knowledge, understanding of reality and the nature of Being will best be approached by first attempting to concisely elucidate the concept “Metaphysics.” This is essential to enable us understand the scholarly sense in which it is used here as distinct from the layman’s conception or, other misconceptions of the concept as meaning or having to do with *voodoo*, sorcery, necromancy, witchcraft, parapsychology and all such occultic and spiritual things or activities (Unah, 2006:1). The etymological combination, *meta ta physica*, an accidental construction of Andronicus of Rhodes, one of the editors of Aristotle’s works, means “after physics,” or “beyond nature” as it was meant to represent Aristotle’s works untitled physics which he (Aristotle) titled “First Philosophy.” This portrays metaphysics as an act of transcendence, that is, an act of going beyond things in order to affirm things (Ibid, p. 2-3). In this classical sense, metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality “the fundamental nature of reality” (Hospers, 1973: 350).

Metaphysics is the search for the unifying principle that underlies, or serves as foundation for reality and all of our experiences. It is a comprehensive account of experience, of the world, of the universe. Every comprehensive account of experience of the world, of the universe is informed by a theory of being or a principle of reality that is, a categorical assertion about being, about reality or whatever is. A metaphysician is one who adopts a position or who furnishes a ground and proceeds to reduce all reality, all experiences to the adopted position of furnished ground. The metaphysician may be more aptly described as the editor of reality because he seeks to determine the principle or category of reality that governs the world, that grounds experience, that explains the universe [Unah, 2004 (A): 10]. Put different, every comprehensive account of reality implies a transcendence of, or a going beyond reality to the reason by which it comes to be and have meaning.

Metaphysics has two broad aspects. The first is *metaphysica specialis* which deals with fundamental principles underlying fragments or aspects of reality as seen in the regional ontologies or specialized sciences which deal with particular aspects of what is such as History, Sociology, Physics, Psychology, Chemistry, Biology, Economics, Anthropology, among others. The second is *metaphysica generalis*, which is what is left of philosophy after this fragmentation and it deals with Being in general, reality in general or generalized ontology (Ibid. pp 10-11). Thus, metaphysics as a philosophical discipline deals with the underlying principle on which reality is grounded, the Being from which all existing beings find meaning; hence it is often referred to as transcendental philosophy.

Another concept needing elucidation in terms of its use here is the concept “African.” The use of the concept “African” in any scholarly work can easily be misinterpreted to mean that whatever is being attributed to the concept is something that is homogeneous and identical in all societies and sub-regions of the African continent. This is the problem that Paulin Houtondji has with the concept ‘African philosophy’ or “African thought” because it is expressed as if it is a static, immutable, homogenous thought abstracted from history and progress (1983: 33). However, it will be a mark of

ignorance to continue to hold tenaciously that all Africans conceive reality from exactly the same perspective evidenced from experiences of different communities in the African continent on various issues where we realize slightly different positions. What we have are similar outlooks which enjoy a higher semblance than with views outside the African sub-region (Ozumba, 2004). The use of the concept “an African” here therefore signifies the conception of reality or being in a particular African society though it is arguably true that such conception of being is very much similar across African societies evidenced in the available literatures on African ontology or metaphysics [see Unah, 2004 (B): 353]. Thus, though we refer mainly to the Bantu and Esan cultures, we do not hesitate to refer to other African societies with similar viewpoint when the need arises.

Bearing these in mind, we can then move further to examine the nature of an African traditional metaphysics and the cognitive significance such a conception of being or reality has for the African society.

The Nature of an African Traditional Metaphysics

From the above clarifications, we can define an African (traditional) metaphysics as an African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions among Beings in general. It is the totality of the African’s perception of reality. An African metaphysics will therefore include systematization of an African perspective as it relates to being and existence. This will embrace the holistic conception of reality with its appurtenance of relations, qualities, characterization, being and its subtleties, universals, particulars, ideas, mind, culture, logic, morals, theories and presuppositions (Ozumba, 2004). An African traditional metaphysics is a postulation of an overall process which penetrates every possible experience. The African does not postulate a static aspect of reality trying to reduce all experience to it.¹ Instead, the African postulates a simple unifying principle which permeates everything there is.² The question he asks is, “what is it that makes possible for things to be all? [Unah, 2004 (B): 339].

The African does not seek to make the Parmenidean distinction between “being” and “non-being,” between “what is” and “what is not,” between “reality” and “illusion” or between “something” and “nothing” (Cf. Russell, 1980:66-70). He knows by experience that whatever is (even nothing) is a being-unto-something, existing for a reason though we may not immediately come to terms with why such is, hence, the futility of trying to distinguish something from nothing. Experience has thought him as well that where our normal perceptual apparatus cannot grasp something, there must be something of a sort [Unah, 2004 (B): 340], invisible or spiritual entities; the fact that spiritual entities are invisible does not negate their reality in fact, they could even be more real than the entities that can be directly apprehended empirically (Ekanola, 2006: 76). The African therefore, simply seeks to know that ultimate cosmic principle that renders all of their experiences possible.

In the quest to unravel that cosmic principle, that over-all process that penetrates all reality and permeates all possible experiences, it is common in most African

communities to identify it with a Vital Force. Two things must be made clear about the vital force. First, most scholars in African philosophy identify the vital force with “spirit.” But scholars like Kwasi Wiredu urges against the use of such Western conceptual idiom to replace the concept of vital force because it is apt to prevent the researcher from getting an apposite meaning of the concept (see Wiredu, 1995). In this paper, we will therefore avoid the use of spirit and stick simply to vital force; this becomes more essential as it will make it easier to distinguish it (vital force) from the beings or forces referred to as spirits in an African ontology. Second, African philosophers are quick to conclude that this vital force that permeates all experiences is God (as presented by the Western concept). However, as we shall soon notice from Tempels and Kagame’s analysis of the vital force in Bantu Ontology, the vital force is not the western concept of God; rather God is a being (the Supreme being) a force permeated by the vital force. The vital force in an African traditional metaphysics or ontology is similar to the Heideggerian “Pune Being” which Heidegger argues vehemently that it is not God but the being of beings from which all beings derive their being, a being who itself is not an existing entity but permeates all existing entities (Omogbe, 1999:71). In like manner, the African concept of a vital force implies a force which permeates and penetrates all existing entities or beings or forces. Alexis Kagame and Placide Tempels identifies force in

Bantu ontology as *NTU* which permeates all other forces namely *Muntu*, *Kintu*, *Hantu* and *Kuntu* arranged in hierarchical order. *NTU* as the vital principle or force is the underlying, unifying force that brings to being *Muntu*, the force that all of forms of intelligence partake from, *Kintu*, the force which permits all non-intelligent nature such as plants, minerals, tools etc, which as frozen forces awaits the bidding of intelligent forces (the *Mantu*) for their activation, *Hantu*, the category of force which makes events of allsorts possible, and *Kuntu*, the force which governs all modality such as beauty, ugliness, laughter, etc. [Unah, 2004 (B): 340-41].

Let us explore the principle of universal force or vital principle as employed in an African traditional metaphysics a bit further as it is essential for our understanding of its cognitive role in an African culture. In Bantu ontology *Muntu*, as noted earlier, represents the forces endowed with intelligence. Forces in the *Muntu* category are apparently higher in virtue of their being vested with intelligence. It is in this category that you can situate God, human beings ancestors, and the like. Hence *Muntu* is used to refer to “person” — God person, human person etc. — who is endowed with vital force and intelligence. God, however, is to the Bantu, the great, supreme person or being (the Great *Muntu*). In relation to other beings in the hierarchy, the God person is one who communicates or gives the vital force to other beings. According to Tempels, he is the one who increases forces, the creator and sustainer of the universe (Unah, p. 345). He is the being in which the vital principle or force finds full manifestation. Therefore, God is the being who gives the vital principle - *ehi* in Esan, *emi* in Yoruba (see Oyeshile, 2006: 157), *mmuo* in Igbo, *okra* in Akan, etc. — to man or the individual person but is not himself the vital principle. For example, the Esan name for God *Ose-no-bua* is often interpreted as: God stretches out his hand to give life (vital force). Hence when the Esan man says *Ose-ma-gbon*, he does not mean that it is God who creates the vital force (or life) but that it is God who created the world. The confusion easily comes from the word

agbon which denotes both “life” and “World” and hence, one must be careful in interpreting it as such must be context based. The Igbos also have a saying (at times given as a name) that Chinenye ndu (It is God who gives life).

Other beings in the hierarchy — ancestral spirits, divinities and deities, human beings, animal, plants and natural tools (see Opoku, 1978:9-10) - participate in different degrees in the divine force of the Great Person (God) who is an embodiment of the vital force.

From the foregoing, it is vivid that the vital force or principle taken as the ultimate stuff of reality in an African traditional metaphysics in itself not a being of some Sort but the force behind the manifestations of all sorts of beings. The vital force therefore manifest itself in different manner through these beings. This is why there is no distinction between different aspects of reality in an African traditional thought evident in the empiricism—rationalism controversy in Western thought as all aspects of reality are seen as the diversities and manifestations of the unifying force of reality hence the futility of bifurcating reality into pieces. Summarily, the African metaphysical concept of being is force; that this force permeates everything “that is;” that forces are in a hierarchy and are constantly interacting with one another as manifestations of the vital force [Unah, 2004 (B): 347]. We can thus say that in an African traditional metaphysics,

Force is the supreme principle of individuality; plurality and unity
Force finds expression in practically everything that is. Force permeates everything, every thinking, every idea, every utterance, every event and every preoccupation. Force is the enduring, sustaining process that makes things possible (*Ibid.* p. 349).

Force is therefore that primary stuff that underlies the process and possibility of being, of entities unfolding their being. It is for this reason than an African traditional metaphysics is said to be holistic and dynamic rather than static. But what cognitive role does this metaphysical thinking play in an African culture?

Cognitive Significance of African Traditional Metaphysics

We have so far elaborated above African metaphysical thinking which recognizes or identifies a vital force or principle as the primary stuff of reality as a whole that permeates all existing entities - visible or invisible - and it is the process or possibility of the unfolding of their being. We now turn to identify what significance such had in traditional African culture in cognizing and understanding phenomena and in maintaining harmony and order amongst all beings. We shall attempt this under three headings:

- (i) Agency: Explanation, Prediction and Control.
- (ii) Tackling fundamental Issues of Ethics and Society
- (iii) The Attitude of Tolerance.

(i) *Agency: Explanation, Prediction and Control*

An African traditional metaphysics commits one to the existence of unobservable entities that can act as causal agents. “Unobservable” refers to purported objects, theoretical posits that cannot be accessed through the senses or through the enhancements of the senses - eye-glasses telescopes, microscopes, hearing aids, etc. (Brown, 2004:159). These paranormal agencies such as the ancestral spirits, deities, divinities, roaming spirits, witches etc, are believed, in an African traditional culture, to have certain power to cause certain things to happen in the physical, observable realm of things. They have therefore, no doubt, proven useful, and are useful in the explanation, prediction and control of events, occurrences and phenomena. As Albert Mosley says,

The functions of such beliefs and their associated practices is to explain and influence the occurrence of events by reference to the casual agency of spiritual entities and psychic forces (2004:136).

Let us consider some instances. Among the Esan People of Edo State, Nigeria, there are such explanations of events by recourse to paranormal causal agencies. This is evident in the practice of *ebô* and *ikçbô*. Some events and occurrences are explained and predicted by recourse to the causal spiritual entity *ebô*. A deity, and are controlled by *ikçbô*, that is, processes of appeasing the deity (literally “dance of *ebô*”). If, for instance, an individual is stagnant in life, remains poor no matter the thorough-going efforts he puts into his handwork or business in order to change his situation, he is told to consult an *igwçga* (oracle). In his consultation of *igwçga*; he is told that his misfortunes is caused by his inability to realize his commitment to the deity *ebô* in a relationship established by his ancestors for his own well-being and the well-being of every member of the family, both the living and yet unborn. He is then told to carry out *ikçbô*, some processes to appease the *ebô* in order for wellbeing and progress to return to him and his family. Once this (*ikçbô*) is done he begins to observe positive changes in his life. Another instance of explanation based on spiritual causal agencies is that of child convulsion. When a child is convulsing, in traditional Esan community he is believed to be hunted, troubled or tested by an evil, troublesome or jobless force or spirit hence the saying: *Emi dâmôn* (Something is testing him/her). Some rites are then made and in most cases a bead or necklace with an *ukpugho* or (cowries or tiny shiny beads respectively) is worn on his/her neck to scare away the evil force. And it does stop disturbing him or her. A third instance is that related to what is now being called migraine headache or, even something worse. This ailment was more found in ladies than men. Its symptom was constant and severe headache, which leads to the consultation of an *igwçgâ* who appeases the causal agent and ties on *ukpugho* or *ukpigho* (plural) or *âwçnwçn* on the hair of the affected individual. This marks the end of the ailment except for normal headache resulting from stress which is easily cured via herbs. These instances³ are just few of a thousand of such in Esan nay African community.

There is something very important and worth noting here. That Africans make recourse to paranormal, spiritual entities for explanation, prediction and control of events that occur around them should not lead anyone to hastily generalize that all explanation, prediction and control of events in an African community is solely a

recourse to the paranormal. Indeed there are purely scientific ones that have nothing whatsoever to do with the forces beyond the physical. G. Sogolo says succinctly for instance, about the Azande that,

They provide descriptions of objects and explanation of events in theoretical categories not tied to magical or religious beliefs. The Azande have principles and beliefs about how to hunt for animals. They know the kind of soil that would produce harvest, and the place where, or season when hunting is most successful. They have knowledge of nutritional techniques, the food that nourishes and that which does not; that which is poisonous and that which is not. It would therefore be a mistake to suggest that in these areas of their daily activities the Azande always resort to magical or religious explanations (1996: 72-73).

This same point is stressed by Jarvie that:

When the native want crops, they don't just chant, they chant and they plant seeds; they chant and they cast their fishing net; they pray and they go out and hunt. That they indulge in magic does not mean they have no science, they fully realize that the two must go together (1974: 53).

Therefore, an African traditional metaphysics encourages both scientific and non-scientific modes of thought and recourse is made to the latter in cases where the former fails to yield result. We are however concerned with the non-scientific here because it is the one that tends to pose difficulties to scholars alien to the African traditional culture which make such thinking pre-logical, mystical or irrational to them. But more recently, two explanations have been given to them.

First is the idea of "theoretical posits," that is, the belief in spiritual causal agency is merely a human construct just like those observed in modern science in terms of atomic and subatomic particles meant to explain certain events or phenomena and remain meaningful as long as they serve this purpose. Robin Horton is one of the advocates of this position and he says thus that,

...the relation between the many spirits and the one God loses much of its aura of mystery. Indeed, there turns out to be nothing peculiarly religious or mystical about it. For it is essentially the same as the relations between the homogenous atoms and the planetary systems of fundamental particles; in the thinking of a chemist it is a by-product of certain very general features of the way theories are used in explanation (1974: 144).

Brown buttresses this when he says,

Like the ancestral spirits of traditional African culture, the subatomic particles of quantum physics are not really amenable to observation, and even among the experts, there is debate over the physical reality of such posited entities (p. 166).

The conclusion is thus that spirits are to African traditional thought what material particles are to Western scientific thought (Masolo, 1995: 129) since it shares the same

purpose of modern natural science which may be summarized in the slogan: explanation, predication and control (see Appiah, 1992: 120).

The second position, which seems to be a more correct and appropriate description of the nature of explanation in an African traditional ontology is that though Africans share similar way of theorizing with modern science by constructing ad-hoc hypothesis (see Hospers, pp; 3 19-20, 392-93) or theoretical posits for explanation, prediction and control of events, this does not in any way render all spiritual or paranormal entities or beings unreal and mere theoretical constructs. Evidently, these beings have real existence and well-trained and developed traditional medicine men do claim to see them and communicate with them and they are known to manifest through intermediary physical/material objects, which is the reason why they are best seen as quasi-material entities. The African is convinced that the vital force brings into existence both physical, quasi-material and spiritual beings who interact and effect each other and hence, explanations for occurrences can be gotten from whatever realm of real existent beings. And due to the pragmatic nature of this belief, they continue to hold on tenaciously to it as a significant means of explanation, prediction and control.

From the few examples we examined here, we can come to the conclusion that though such cannot be explained scientifically, they are evidently truthful, meaningful and significant due to their pragmatic nature.

(ii) *Tackling Fundamental Issues of Ethnics and Society*

An African traditional metaphysics has proved instrumental to the African in tackling fundamental issues of ethics and society and as such has been fundamental to the question of cohesion, social control, law and order within the African society. The fact of the African living in harmony with his environment and the world is rooted in a metaphysics that sees this as a necessary off-shoot of man's relationship with the force that controls these spheres of reality. In these sense the spirits and the concomitant and ancillary cosmic forces serve not only as instances of arbitration and punishment but also instances of reward in our relationship with the world. Man's relationship with these forces is thus borne not only out of the intellectual curiosity to know their nature, essence and mode of existence but also Out of man's personal relationship with these forces as sources of regulation of social order and individual conflicts (Asouzu, 1998). In the Esan culture for instance, a woman who commits adultery is hunted by the matrilineal ancestral spirit of the husband until she confesses her evil deeds. In most cases, her child (first child) falls ill and no amount of medical or herbal treatment can cure the prolonged ailment. When this is noticed, the elders of the husband or father of the child, advices the man to interrogate the wife, for the answer or solution lies in her. In other words, she must confess her evil deeds else the child dies. In most cases, the woman confesses and the child gets well and lives. Hence, this effective but paranormal law checks any woman who would have indulged in unfaithful acts to refrain from such else face the consequences of embarrassment, divorce or even loosing her child.

That the influence of these forces was felt beyond the world of human existence shows itself in the African understanding of the influence of these forces on all conditions necessary for a meaningful life. African traditional metaphysics has been the guarantor of the African understanding of community life as a cooperate affair since it

created the preconditioning for understanding of social cohesion based on people's alignment and allegiance to particular metaphysical forces that gives meaning collectively to their lives and actions. This conception about the community has been one of the important factors that have guaranteed the continuing survival of African people in the face of untold economic and social difficulties and hardships. This type of metaphysics sustains the psyche of the individual who relegates his absolute confidence to forces whose loyalty can be guaranteed through man's religious, cultic and moral obligations to them. On the basis of African traditional metaphysics, personal questions concerning the end of life, the things most central to human existence are answered. Here individuals survive to live and take their consolation on these answers, believing that they are based on a vital force that continuously unfolds (*Ibid*). Hence, besides helping to explain, predict and control events, African traditional metaphysics is also significant by help to ensure harmony among all existing beings and forces. With this sort of metaphysics in mind, the African community is able to acquire and internalize cultural values⁴ that are essential in sustaining the harmony between all existing beings such as love, loyalty courage, empathy (see Brown, p. 173) and all such humane values obviously lacking in contemporary African cities.

(iii) *The Attitude of Tolerance*

Understanding that the vital force or principle is the underlying unifying principle that permeates all beings, and that this vital force can manifest as different forces, the African comes to the knowledge that reality is diverse and hence, there are different aspects of reality, different ways of manifesting the one vital force. Jim Unah therefore says that,

Spirit or force, for the African, is that reality that exhibits itself in aspects or profiles. All things that there are, are aspects of the spirit. Spirit permeates everything. A dynamic metaphysician recognizes this and is not disposed to repudiating or discrediting an aspect of reality (say a view) with which he is not familiar. He is ready to give it some attention, to give it a trial, a listening ear. The dynamic metaphysician sees in every event, every view, every position, everything, an element of spirit whose fascination he cannot resist. He sees everything as the self-manifestation of the spirit [2004(B):351].

An African would readily agree with Epictetus who says that: "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead them to happen as they do happen and your life will go well" (Epictetus,1942: c.8). This is an apposite description of the African of metaphysics, the spirit of tolerance, the ability to "lack all dissatisfaction with anything about the world, while at the same time being conscious and intelligent" (see White's Introduction to Epictetus, p. 2). This accounts for why in an African society, one finds a multiplicity of deities not one, but all united with the vital c: and all tolerated except it is seen as a threat to the harmony maintained with the vital force. This also accounts for the less burden the missionary had in introducing his Christian religion into core traditional African societies as it was seen as another manifestation of the vital force. Problems only arise when these missionaries due to their myopic and static view of reality seek to destroy or fight against the predominant religions or ways

of worship in the African societies. It is the lack of this spirit of tolerance that causes the chaos in our contemporary Africa nay world today where aspects of reality are seeking to reduce the whole of reality, the vital force to itself, hence disregarding other aspects of reality that are as well essential for comprehensive cognition of reality. The African traditional metaphysics is therefore dynamic because it discourages such chaotic, myopic and static metaphysics that does not allow for tolerance and comprehensive cognition of reality. Hence, Unah adds thus,

The upshot of a dynamic metaphysics is that it cultivates in its adherents an attitude of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. It makes man more accommodative of his fellow man and engenders a respectful approach to things and people. The purveyor of a dynamic metaphysics has no absolute truth for which he is prepared to die... because he lives in the knowledge that every truth, every event and every human setting implies a presenting of the spirit (Force). It is this dynamic conception of reality that essentially characterizes African metaphysics.

Conclusion

We have examined here how an African traditional metaphysics revolves round the conception of a vital force that is the primary unifying stuff of the universe permeating all existing beings, physical, quasi-physical or spiritual. We have also explained that the significance of this sort of dynamic metaphysics results in:

- ability to cognize, explain, predict and control events and phenomenon by appeal to all manifestations of the vital; force, physical or not, as causal agents;
- ability to tackle fundamental issues of ethics and social harmony by being able to come to terms with the need to maintain a harmonious relationship amongst all beings by the internalization of appropriate values adherence or non-adherence to which has its consequences;
- ability to tolerate every event, view or position as simply aspects of reality, manifestations of the vital principle hence ensuring for peaceful coexistence.

Therefore, in an African traditional metaphysics lies a fertile source of knowledge and values exploration of which is very essential for some significant changes to be made in our chaotic modern societies particularly here in Africa.

Notes

1. This is common in classical Western metaphysics where metaphysicians identify an aspect of reality based, for instance, on sense experience or reason, and proceed to reduce all experience to it. This leads to the Parmenidean attitude of “Being is. Non-being is not” which discards as “not anything” or unreal whatever does not fall

within the identified aspect or stuff of reality which is now taken as the basic or primary principle of reality, this sort of temperament is characteristic of the major world religions - Christianity and Islam - where each claim to have the one and only principle or picture of reality or truth and see any other claim as “Nothing”. The end result of this sort of static metaphysics is repudiation, oppression, conflict, violence, and a myopic view of reality [Cf. Unah, 2004 (A):35-37]. This sort of metaphysics is atypical of an African traditional metaphysics.

2. This sort of metaphysical thinking is similar to that of the pre-Socratic philosophers and cosmologists who sort for the unifying and primary stuff of the universe.
3. These instances among the Esan people, from my personal experiences, are still very much observed today and effective for those who adhere to the practices.
4. Kwame Gyekye gives a detailed analysis of such cultural values inherent in an African traditional community in his *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (1996).

Afrika Geleneksel Metafiziğinin Bilişsel Önemi

Öz

Bu yazı, Afrika’lıların bütün varolan fiziksel, yarı-fiziksel ya da spiritual varlıklara nüfuz eden, evrenin ilk birleştirici unsuru olarak kabul ettikleri yaşama gücü kavrayışıyla ilgili olan Afrika metafiziği sorununu incelemektedir. Yazı esas itibarıyla bu birleştirici gücün önemli ve dinamik olduğunu bulgulamaktadır. Burada kavramsal analiz yöntemi kullanılmaktadır ve sürekli değişen bir dünyada ihtiyaç duyduğumuz bilgi ve değerleri keşfetmek için Afrika geleneksel metafiziğinin bize verimli bir kaynak sunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Metafizik, Afrika, Yaşama Gücü, Bilişsel Önem, Ruh, Tolerans ve Etik.

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