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Ubuntu/Unhu Axiological Emphasis: The Insidious Debasement of the Philosophy

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Abstract

The Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy being non-Western has generated some contentions about it being considered as a philosophy. It does not readily meet the classification criterion of a philosophy of being classical or modern. The consideration of Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy among other philosophies has been distorted by the philosophic orientations of the creators of text about the philosophy. Some creators of text define Ubuntu/Unhu as a conglomeration of ethical considerations of certain ethnic groups in southern Africa. Others consider it as an ideology germane to some African traditional cultures. This article unveils some nuances that have contributed to the debasement of Ubuntu/Unhu that makes it (in some instances) not to be conceptualised as a philosophy in its own right. The qualitative research approach was employed in the generation of data. Ten elderly informants with ages ranging from sixty-five to ninety were purposively selected from Masvingo and Umzingwane Districts in Zimbabwe and were interviewed. The informants' conceptions of Ubuntu/Unhu have emphasis on axiology, a branch of philosophy. The institutional core values of fifteen teacher education colleges were analysed and it was ascertained that all of them conceptualize Unhu/Ubuntu as a 'value' that is considered like any other ethical values. The conception of Ubuntu/Unhu as a philosophy should be emphasized in teacher education institutions for the dissemination of undistorted information to the learners at elementary education levels.

Keywords: Philosophy; Ubuntu/Unhu; Zimbabwe

Introduction

In some philosophical texts, there is a philosophy which is referred to as African philosophy which is often used interchangeably with Ubuntu/Unhu. The term 'African philosophy' is rather vague since it is not specific about what is encapsulated in a philosophy to be dubbed 'African'. There are three aspects that can be considered for being African which are; spatiality, temporality and negritude. Spatiality is concerned with being on the continent of Africa. Temporality is concerned with the epoch in which the philosophy which guided the indigenous Africans was in its 'purity' (as if it's not susceptible to some socio-cultural, political and economic changes and developments). The aspect of negritude is concerned with the dark skin pigmentation (which is exclusive of all Caucasians on the continent of Africa and all the light-skinned people of Northern Africa). Thus the aspects that are considered African create complexities about the philosophy which is referred to as African. The argument is that there is no philosophy that is characteristic of all the people on the continent of Africa. Because of the different historic-geographical situations, the people on the continent of Africa have diverse worldviews.

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The people of Southern Africa had their ancestry guided by the philosophy referred to as Ubuntu by the Zulu, Xhosa, Ngwane of South Africa and the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. The philosophy Ubuntu has linguistic variations which are as follows: Umuthu – Chewa in Zambia; Umundu – Yao of Malawi; Bunhu – Tsonga in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland; Botho – Basotho of Lesotho [1] and Unhu – Shona of Zimbabwe [2]. The most popular label of the philosophy is Ubuntu since the script-exponents of the philosophy who produced maiden text about it were living among the Zulu, Xhosa and Ngwane of South Africa.

The Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy has been downplayed and not considered as a philosophy in its own right. Some authorities who produced text on Ubuntu/Unhu have not been considering it as a philosophy. There is a common tag that can be pasted on the work of Metz and Gaie [3], Metz [4], Bessler [5], Broodryk [6], Ramose [7,8], Letseka [9], Sindane and Liebenberg [10], Tutu [11], Mokgoro [12], Shutte [13], Teffo [14], Sindane [15] about the conception of Ubuntu/Unhu as a moral theory [16].

Contextual Background

Ubuntu/Unhu like all other philosophies, has the branches of philosophy which are; axiology, metaphysics, epistemology, logic and semantics. It has an overemphasis on the axiological branch. Axiology is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the study of values [17]. The etymology of the term 'axiology' is from two Greek words; 'axia' which means 'value' or 'worth' and 'logos' which means the consideration or study of something [18]. Thus axiology is the philosophical study of value. In academic circles, the term 'axiology' is often used interchangeably with the term 'theory of values'. Values are categorized into ethics and aesthetics. Ethics is concerned with the study of values in human behaviour as manifested by their interaction patterns that are judged on the criteria of humaneness. Thus axiology is akin to the study of morality. Aesthetics is a branch of axiology that deals with the nature of beauty and harmony [19]. The axiological branch is more vicious than virtuous to the realisation of Ubuntu/Unhu as a philosophy since integrity, one of the cardinal values, is often erroneously considered as its synonym.

The indigenous languages of southern Africa have a manifest description of the term 'philosophy'. They describe it as a way of life of a people. The latent aspect which is the worldview is dormant. The manifest description has an axiological slant which could have influenced a distorted description of Ubuntu/Unhu as a philosophy.

Some texts about Ubuntu/Unhu consider it as a concept. In order to judge the credibility of the label there is need to consider what the term 'concept' entails. A concept is an objective idea of something [20]. Other texts about Ubuntu/Unhu describe it as the conceptions on the axiological aspects of people of southern Africa indigenes. A conception refers to a certain person's subjective idea of something [20]. Thus the terms 'concept' and 'conception' should be distinguished so as ward off the confusion about what Ubuntu/Unhu is and what it is thought to be. Its consideration as a concept in some texts is an indication that it is not taken as a philosophy.

The South African educational policy framework placed high premium on Ubuntu and required the education system to promote Ubuntu-oriented attributes and dispositions among the learners [21]. Similarly, the Zimbabwean Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education Science and Technology Development has mandated the teacher education colleges in Zimbabwe and other institutions of higher learning to embrace Ubuntu/Unhu in their activities as recommended by the Presidential Enquiry on Education of 1999 which was dubbed 'Nziramasanga Commission' [22]. The call for the inclusion of Ubuntu/Unhu does not consider it as a philosophy but as a code of contact for the educators and the learners who were in moral decadence. The teacher education colleges have responded to the call by including the 'term' Ubuntu/Unhu in their list of core values. This article among other foci assesses the extent to which the lists of core values of the teacher education colleges have debased Ubuntu/Unhu as a philosophy. A distorted conception of Ubuntu/Unhu begets a detrimental promotion of the philosophy.

This paper is drawn on the University of South Africa (UNISA)'s three-year 'Archaeology of Ubuntu' study, which was funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. The study, which was conducted during 2014-2016 was a Southern African research project carried out in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and in five (5) provinces in South Africa, namely Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West during 2014-2016. The specific data for this paper were generated in Masvingo and Umzingwane Districts in Zimbabwe.

The paper comprises of four aspects. The first aspect is a discourse on the debasement of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. The second aspect is a focus on textual material that considers Ubuntu as a philosophy in its own right. The aspect that follows the conceptual aspects is the research methodology. The qualitative research methodology was employed since the researchers were interested in the emic explanations and interpretations of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. The emic (informants') responses informed the etic (researchers') reflections on the findings. The reflections revealed both the informal and formal debasement of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. The last section of the paper is the

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conclusion.

Misconceptions of the Philosophy of Ubuntu

The misconceptions about the Ubuntu philosophy have a bearing on the classifications of philosophies as classical and modern. Ubuntu/Unhu as a non-Western philosophy was neither classified as classical nor modern even though it has some characteristics of both classifications.

Classical philosophies are the traditional philosophies that were constituted by the convictions, assumptions, and reflections on experiences of the people of ancient times [23]. The philosophies had the proponents and the exponents as the ancient Greek philosophers for example Plato and Aristotle of idealism and materialism respectively. The philosophies were further developed by the thinkers in the Medieval and post-Medieval eras. The constituent characteristics of the classical philosophies are also found in the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy.

Modern philosophies are the philosophies that developed in the era of modernity. The era spans between the 17th and early 20th centuries. Modern Philosophies focus on the reconciliation of the philosophical ideas of traditional Aristotlean philosophy and the Christian religion with the radical scientific developments. Thus the thrust of modern philosophies is on rethinking, recreating and transforming of the world in the wake of socio-political and scientific developments [24]. The philosophies are attuned to the prevailing situations in society and their focus is on the rational understanding of the world.

The Ubuntu philosophy has been debased and demeaned by some authorities since it has been conceptualized as a moral theory [4,9,13]. Further elaboration on the conception of Ubuntu/Unhu as a moral theory is that it is associated with humaneness or being humane [3,4,6,9,12,14,25]. A theory is a set of ideas about a phenomenon [26,27] and can also be conceptualized as an explanation of a particular social phenomenon [28]. Another conceptualization of the term 'theory' is that it is an overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world [26]. Morality is about actions that are accepted by a community [29]. Thus a moral theory is a set of ideas about the behaviours that are accepted within a community, how a community explains morality or how a community perceives and interprets the moral realm.

A moral-theory based definition of Ubuntu/Unhu is also given by Metz [4] who postulates that Ubuntu is a theory of right action and that Ubuntu is fundamentally a matter of reverence of human life. The seriousness of the debasement of the Ubuntu/Unhu is apparent in the conception by Teffo [14] when he posits that Ubuntu serves as a cohesive moral value in the face of adversity. The conception by Teffo demeans the Ubuntu philosophy to a reactionary value. The philosophy has values under its axiological branch and should not be considered as one of its values.

The Ubuntu/Unhu has also been debased to a concept and a notion. Mokgoro [12] postulates; The concept of Ubuntu, like many concepts is not easily defined. Defining an African notion in a foreign language and from an abstract, as opposed to a concrete approach, defies the very essence of the African worldview and may also be particularly illusive.

Tutu has the same sentiments and postulates that Ubuntu is very difficult to explain in a Western language. In the same vein, Mokgoro [12] does not conceptualize Ubuntu as a philosophy but considers it as a concept in an indigenous language.

Referring to Ubuntu as a notion further exacerbates its debasement since a notion has idiographic connotations. The term 'idiographic' is derived from the Greek word 'idios' which means 'personal' or 'private'. A philosophy should not be private but is shared and is thus nomothetic. The etymology of the term 'nomothetic' is from the Greek word 'nomos' which means 'law' and thus has connotations of commonality and sharing [30].

Ubuntu/Unhu was conceptualized by Letseka [16] in almost the same way but with different ramifications. He postulates that Ubuntu can be considered as a notion of African communal justice and fairness and as a normative concept.

According to Nkondo [31], Ubuntu/Unhu is considered as a public policy which can be employed to foster ethical dispositions that promote unity among racial and ethnic groups in South Africa. Considering Ubuntu/Unhu as public policy is a debasement of the philosophy. Public policy is the principled guide to action considered by the government in the administration of the public in line with the law and institutional customs [32]. In fact Ubuntu guides public policy.

Ubuntu/Unhu has also not been considered as a philosophy by Nussbaum [33] and Bessler [5] who postulate that in South Africa, the culture of Ubuntu/Unhu is the capacity to express compassion, justice, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building, maintaining and strengthening the community. Thus according to them, Ubuntu/Unhu is considered as a culture which is quite a serious debasement. A more considerate link of Ubuntu/Unhu and culture is given by Le Grange [34] who postulates that Ubuntu/Unhu's meaning is interwoven in the cultural practices and lived experiences of the dark

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complexioned indigenes of southern Africa.

The Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy has also been debased as an ethno-philosophy. According to Keevy [35] and Oruka [36] Ubuntu/Unhu is an ethno-philosophy which represents an ancient worldview of traditional African societies. Oruka opines that an ethno-philosophy is characterised by a group's mythical, uncritical and emotive worldview. Oruka also considers ethno-philosophy as the convictions of a people which can be considered as a form of religion which is communal. Thus consideration of Ubuntu/Unhu as an ethno-philosophy is serious debasement of the philosophy especially the label 'uncritical'.

The consideration of Ubuntu/Unhu as a worldview was also brought up by Broodryk [6] who posited that Ubuntu/Unhu is a worldview that emphasizes the commonality and interdependence of the members of the traditional African communities. He further elaborates that Ubuntu/Unhu can be conceptualized as a comprehensive ancient African worldview based on the values of humanness, caring, respect, compassion and associated values. The inclusion of the term 'traditional' in the description of Ubuntu also demeans the philosophy since philosophies are classified as classical or contemporary and there has been no other philosophy labelled traditional except for Ubuntu/Unhu. Marx [37] exacerbates the debasement of Ubuntu/Unhu by positing that it is an invented tradition whose task is to minimize historical chasms and fractures. The term 'invented' is derogatory for a philosophy. The purported reactive nature of Ubuntu was further emphasized by Swanson [38] who postulates that Ubuntu/Unhu serves as a philosophy of the struggle for people trying to heal the brutality and desperateness of a deeply ruptured society.

Considerations of Ubuntu/Unhu as a Philosophy

Ubuntu/Unhu is a philosophy that emphasizes on mutuality [21] and has a humanistic orientation towards fellow beings [12]. It has an adage which runs across the different ethnic groups of southern Africa but with different linguistic variations. The adage is; Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (in Nguni languages); Motho ke motho ka botho (in Sotho) [39,40]; Munhu munhu muvanhu (in ChiShona) Peresuh and Nhundu [2]. The adage is central to the philosophy of Ubuntu/Unhu since most of the ideas of the philosophy have a bearing on it. There is encouragement of the individuals to appreciate the contributions of members of the community in the interpretation of the world. Thus Mbiti [41] postulates that in the interpretation of the world, the individual bears it in mind that, 'I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am'. The more comprehensive and encapsulating translation of adage despite the grammatical discord is 'We is thus I am' The term 'we' is representing the community. The adage has epistemological and axiological underpinnings that inform the cultural practices of the Bantu people Ramose [42]. What was postulated by Tshoose [43], Bekker [44] and Mokgoro [12] that there is a coincidence between the values implicit in the constitution of South Africa and some of the key values of Ubuntu/Unhu is a debasement of the philosophy. There is no coincidence as such but the constitution of South Africa is informed by the philosophy.

Ubuntu/Unhu is integrated into all aspects of day-to-day life in most of the tribes in Southern, Central, Western and Eastern Africa amongst people of Bantu origin [45]. According to Mandela [46] Ubuntu/Unhu is a philosophy which promotes a universal truth for underpinning an open society. Consequently the Ubuntu/Unhu axiology could be the panacea to societal challenges caused by closeness of the socio-political order, lack of shared moral discourse and intolerance [47,48].

In the Ubuntu/Unhu there is imbedded the moral obligation of becoming humane. Accordingly, the Ubuntu/Unhu axiological branch has consideration of moral values such as; integrity, altruism, compassion, bigheartedness, empathy, benevolence and courtesy, [9]. The axiological emphasis of Ubuntu/Unhu directly influences the Bantu people's culture.

In the post-colonial African societies, the Ubuntu/Unhu axiology plays a reactive role and has some similarities with the axiological tenets of the Kawaida philosophy. Kawaida is a philosophy whose axiological tenets focus on cultural and social change originated by formally colonised indigenes of Africa for the observance of the best of indigenous African thought and practice. According to Karenga [49]; Kawaida philosophy advocates for constant reference to the African culture 'to reach back and recover its best thought and practice, its paradigms, possibilities, visions and values, and to reconstruct them to enrich our present and frame and forge our future'.

Thus like the Kawaida philosophy Ubuntu/Unhu encapsulates the fundamental ontological and epistemological realms in the indigenous African thoughts of the Bantu-speaking people [24]. From the context above, the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy is a comprehensive indigenous African worldview that has normative implications [16].

Research Methodology

The qualitative research methodology was employed for this study which sought to understand the conceptions of the informants as expressed orally and in official documents. Thus the verbal data generated focused on the conceptions

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of Ubuntu/Unhu found in the expressions, explanations and interpretations of the philosophy. The research paradigm was thus hermeneutic phenomenology.. Hermeneutic phenomenology sets the platform for gaining insights of the spontaneous conceptualizations [50,51] of Ubuntu/Unhu. The spontaneous conceptualizations were expressed in the informants' own words to authenticate the etic interpretations of the researchers O'Leary Z [52], De Vos, et al. [53].

The data were generated using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. For the semi-structured interviews, the informants were purposively selected. Purposive sampling is a technique which makes the researcher to select informants who are information-rich. Ahmad, et al. [54] postulate that purposive sampling is the informant selection process where informants are selected on the basis of meeting the criteria predetermined by the researchers such as being appropriate to addressing the research question (e.g., the elderly people who are bearers of some peculiar knowledge). Thus purposive sampling is used so that individuals who possess information that is important to the phenomenon being studied are selected [50]. The essence of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases whose responses will illuminate the question under study [55]. Thus, the size of the sample selected purposively is determined by informational considerations.

The community elders who were selected as informants were considered to be the less adulterated, living exponents of the Ubuntu/Unhu. They were ten community elders – five males and five females aged between sixty-five and ninety five years (Table 1). During their childhood, the informants' world views were guided by the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy which was both exemplified and passed by word of mouth by their sagacious elders.

Informant	Province	Male	Female	Age
Informant 1	Masvingo		X	76
Informant 2	Masvingo		X	69
Informant 3	Masvingo		X	85
Informant 4	Masvingo	X		65
Informant 5	Masvingo	X		90
Informant 6	Umzingwane		X	95
Informant 7	Umzingwane		X	68
Informant 8	Umzingwane	X		75
Informant 9	Umzingwane	X		91
Informant 10	Umzingwane	X		82

Table 1: Community Elders (Respondents) in Zimbabwe, by Province, Gender and Age.

The interviewers captured all the data that were generated by audio-taping the interviews. The audio-taping of the interviews has great facility for transcription [56]. In corroboration of the importance of audio-taping, Cresswell [50] posits that audio-taping is necessary in order to remedy common, everyday memory problems. The interviews which were audio-taped were conducted in ChiShona and IsiNbebele in Masvingo and Umzingwane Districts respectively. The data generated were then transcribed and translated into English. The analysis of the data was done by employing the thematic approach, which condenses identified patterns into themes [57]. The emic perceptions (informants' verbatim perceptions) were the basis on which the etic interpretations (the researchers' interpretations) were created. The etic interpretations culminated into themes [58].

The lists of 'core values' that accompany the mission statements of the teacher education colleges in Zimbabwe were the documents that were considered for the perceptions of Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. All the fifteen teachers education colleges' lists of core values were analysed. Thus comprehensive sampling was done. The comprehensive sampling technique considers every study unit in the population [59].

Reflections on Findings

The conceptualizations of the Ubuntu philosophy by the interviewed elderly people are overwhelmed by the axiological concerns. Informant 4 postulated;

Unhu is concerned with how we think and how we behave among fellow humans. Unhu's vigour is dissipating due to the influence of the Anglican ways of thinking about our interactions in the communities.

The axiological concerns have the manifestations of the other underlying philosophical branches of a philosophy. There was no term for philosophy in the Ubuntu/Unhu societies thus the axiological branch was prominent. Informant 3 conceptualised Ubuntu/Unhu as follows;

I understand unhu as abiding by socially accepted behaviour. Because when we say somebody does not have Unhu we mean that even when he meets elders he/she does not greet them. When he meets with an elderly person carrying a heavy load he/she does not help.

The behavioural manifestation of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy is corroborated by informant 6 who posited that;

It is how a person behaves is it not? Ubuntu is how a person takes charge of himself.

Social behaviour condenses to cultural practices. Thus the exponents of Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy explain it in axiological terms. Informant 1 postulates that;

Unhu is about our cultural trends that are followed by Black people.

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In support of the axiological emphasis of Ubuntu, informants 2, 5, 7 and 8 explained;

Ubuntu/Unhu is our culture –our humaneness.

Ubuntu/Unhu is also explained axiologically, in terms of respect. Thus informant 9 posited;

Out of my experience and in the way that I have seen things happening Ubuntu is about whether the person has respect or not? Does the person show respect in their action like when they are at home they respect the young and the old within the home. Does the person respect those who are not relatives in a similar manner?

The Ubuntu/Unhu axiological value of respect is greatly emphasised. In the same vein, informants 1, 3, 6 and 10 conceptualize Ubuntu in terms of respect. The informants posited that Ubuntu/Unhu is about respect of fellow humans. Integrity is one of the core values in Ubuntu/Unhu. Informant 5 explained;

We say someone has unhu if honest is shown in all interactions with humanity and nature at large. Without honest you are not humane

The value of integrity is overarching in all the human interactions [60]. It is closely intertwined with rectitude. Consequently integrity is the manifestation of effective holistic nurturing of people in the societies guided by Ubuntu/Unhu.

Mis-conceptualization of Ubuntu/Unhu in Mission Statements

The institutional core values of the fifteen teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe were analysed. The core values are listed as;

Professionalism, patriotism, Ubuntu/Unhu/integrity, creativity, responsiveness, innovativeness.

Some teachers' colleges go on to unpack Ubuntu/Unhu/integrity as 'observing morally and culturally acceptable values'.

The teacher education students are supposed to understand and subsequently cherish the institutional values. The inclusion of Ubuntu/Unhu among the institutional core values is a formalised debasement of the philosophy. The students are made to conceptualize Ubuntu/Unhu as being synonymous with integrity. Integrity is a virtue that is characterised by being honest and having strong moral principles, or moral rectitude [61].

As such Ubuntu should not be considered as a synonym of integrity. In fact Ubuntu is a philosophy which has emphasis on axiology. Thus Ubuntu/Unhu axiology contextualises and guides integrity and the other core values of the institutions. The debasement of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy which is embedded in the core values of the teacher education colleges cascades to the primary and secondary school learners and indirectly to society in general.

The term philosophy was not explicitly mentioned in the indigenous African societies that were guided by the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. The fact that the term 'philosophy' was not mentioned is not tantamount to saying that Ubuntu/Unhu is not a philosophy. The people in the African societies were philosophizing being guided by the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy.

Conclusion

The Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy has been grossly debased by some text producers who conceptualized it as a value. In some instances it has been referred to as a moral theory. Some text producers consider Ubuntu/Unhu as a cohesive moral value in the case of adversity in society. Thus Ubuntu/Unhu is conceptualised as an invented tradition whose task is to minimize historical chasms and fractures. In that vein, some text producers posit that Ubuntu/Unhu is a public policy which can be employed to foster ethical dispositions that promote unity among racial and ethnic groups in southern Africa. Serious debasement is also incurred when the Ubuntu philosophy is considered as a concept and a notion which is very difficult to explain in a Western language. The consideration of Ubuntu/Unhu as a notion is further explained as playing the role of promoting indigenous African communal justice and fairness. In some instances, Ubuntu/Unhu is considered as a culture of the indigenes of southern Africa. Thus in the context of culture, some philosophers postulated that Ubuntu/Unhu is an ethno-philosophy which represents an ancient worldview of traditional dark-complexioned African people. Ubuntu/Unhu is not an African Philosophy but a philosophy which guided the dark-complexioned 'Africans' of southern Africa and can be employed to guide the thinking in the post-modernist world. The axiological thrust of Ubuntu/Unhu has caused the debasement of the philosophy. The informants who were interviewed conceptualized it basing on the manifest functions which have axiological inclinations. The teacher education colleges in Zimbabwe have immersely contributed to the debasement of Ubuntu/Unhu by listing it among the core values. Ubuntu/Unhu is a philosophy which emphasizes on mutuality and humane orientation towards fellow beings. It has an adage which runs across the different ethnic groups of southern Africa but with linguistic variations. The adage in Nguni languages is; Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu and in Chishona, Munhu munhu muvanhu. Ubuntu/Unhu has axiological tenets overemphasized.

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