

# The New Wave of Pragmatism in Communication Studies<sup>1</sup>

MATS BERGMAN

## Abstract

This article examines two recent discussions of pragmatism in the field of communication and media studies: Chris Russill's reconstruction of a pragmatist tradition based on the theories of William James and John Dewey, and Mike Sandbothe's neopragmatist design for media philosophy. The main contention of the article is that Russill and Sandbothe advocate an unnecessarily narrow conception of pragmatist thought, one that tends to exclude the contribution of Charles S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism. After the presentation of Russill's and Sandbothe's positions, the article attempts to meet their explicit and implicit criticisms of Peircean pragmatism. More specifically, it is shown that Peirce does not advocate "transcendental universalism". In conclusion, the article argues that his broad conception of experience is preferable to the radical empiricism of James, and that Peircean habit-realism is not only compatible with Dewey's pragmatism, but may in fact provide the most fertile starting-point for pragmatist communication inquiry.

**Keywords:** pragmatism, communication theory, Peirce, James, Dewey

## Introduction

The second coming of pragmatism, a source of inspiration and irritation for philosophers since the 1970s, has at last begun to make serious inroads into communication studies. Of course, pragmatist thought has influenced communication scholars before. However, unless I am mistaken, it is only quite recently that the idea of a distinct, substantial pragmatist *tradition* in communication studies has been explicitly set forth (Russill 2004; 2005b; Craig 2007; see also Simonson 2001). Concurrently, a neopragmatist conception of "media philosophy" has emerged (Sandbothe 2005a; 2005b). Together, these events substantiate the claim of a new wave of pragmatism in media and communication studies.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I will mainly consider two fresh attempts to assess pragmatism's role in communication and media studies: Chris Russill's reconstruction of a pragmatist tradition based on the classical theories of James and Dewey,<sup>3</sup> and Mike Sandbothe's neopragmatist design for an autonomous discipline of media philosophy. There are similarities between these approaches, but also noteworthy differences, which point to certain tensions in pragmatist thought. However, my principal aim is to argue that both Russill and Sandbothe advocate too narrow conceptions of pragmatism. More specifically, both of these attempts to utilise pragmatist philosophy tend to bypass Charles S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, in favour of other figures, such as James and Rorty. This is, I

feel, a rather short-sighted preference – one that might rob the pragmatist movement of some of its conceptual power and critical potential.

In view of the status of Dewey as the seminal pragmatist of the new wave,<sup>4</sup> it is useful to establish that there is far more compatibility between Peircean and Deweyan pragmatism than is commonly recognised. However, a turn to Peirce would certainly involve more than identifying connections to Dewey. Arguably, Peirce's philosophy is capable of providing a fertile platform for critical studies, in spite of its unfashionable leanings toward system-building and its realistic undertones. In my attempt to meet implicit and explicit criticisms of Peirce, I will also suggest that communication studies would be better served by a suitably adapted Peircean habit-realism than by the Jamesian particularism favoured by many new wave pragmatists.

However, lest I be accused of undue narrowness myself, I wish to make it clear that this article will neither do full justice to Russill's and Sandbothe's projects nor attempt to present a full picture of pragmatist thought.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I will not examine the most sustained attempt to utilise Peirce in communication studies to date – Klaus Bruhn Jensen's (1995) social semiotics (see also Bergman 2000; Schrøder 1994a; 1994b). In the present discussion, Peirce's theory of signs is provisionally placed in the background; while no account of Peircean pragmatism is sufficient without a thorough study of its connection to his *semeiotic*, this article is deliberately focused on issues arising from the new wave of pragmatism.<sup>6</sup>

## Radical Empiricism

Russill's project might be simply described as an attempt to establish the existence of a communication-theoretical tradition of pragmatism and its contemporary relevance. At first blush, the claim that there is a distinctive pragmatist school feels like hyperbole, if not outright fabrication. While it cannot be denied that pragmatist thought has affected the field in many ways, it would seem to be a case of sundry influences on individual scholars rather than a tradition of thought in the proper sense.

There is, however, a different way to understand the character of the elusive tradition. Russill (2004) argues that pragmatism is capable of meeting the criteria set up in Robert Craig's "constitutive metamodel" of communication theory (Craig 1999; 2001; 2007). Indeed, it seems that it is not the existence of an actual scholarly community that is primarily at stake here, but rather the demarcation of a characteristic theoretical disposition.

Craig (1999) identifies seven traditions of communication theory: critical, cybernetic, phenomenological, rhetorical, semiotic, sociocultural, and sociopsychological. Russill (2004; 2005b) criticises Craig for ignoring an eighth tradition, that of pragmatism. As Craig (2007) includes Russill's conception in his revised metamodel, we may conclude that this endeavour has been at least partly successful; pragmatism is beginning to be accepted as a genuine alternative in communication theory.

However, it is worth taking a critical look at the particular understanding of the tradition that Russill advocates. While Dewey, with some support from George Herbert Mead, is taken to elaborate a uniquely pragmatistic conception of communication, it is James's ground-breaking efforts that allegedly make this possible. Indeed, Russill's reconstructive endeavour seems to be partly motivated by a wish to vindicate James as an unsung pioneer of communication studies; Russill suggests that we ought to return to pragmatism via James's *radical empiricism*.

Russill construes radical empiricism as a world-view conducive to pragmatist communication inquiry (cf. James 1904a). Moreover, he interprets James's theory in a somewhat unorthodox way, placing less emphasis on its peculiar conception of knowledge than on its perspectival upshot. This is understandable, for James's brand of thorough empiricism contains certain incongruous features that may render it less viable as a fountainhead for communication studies.

Put simply, empiricism "lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction"; it is the opposite of *rationalism*, which "tends to emphasize universals and to make wholes prior to parts in the order of logic as well as in that of being" (James 1904a, p. 534). In other words, the whole is nothing but a sum of its parts, and universals are reducible to particulars. However, in order to be *radical*, empiricism must admit directly experienced relations into its constructions. That is, not merely particular experiences are taken to be "real", but also any particular relation between experiences that is actually experienced.

Accordingly, James's original presentation of radical empiricism puts the emphasis on a reconception of direct experience; the radical empiricist includes basic relations of continuity and discontinuity as well as things in the domain of acceptable empirical particulars. However, one may note a certain vacillation in James's characterisations of pure experience, the assumed primordial state of being; while he stresses the reality of relations in experience, he also claims that the universe of particulars is a *chaos* – which leaves room for rather giddy conclusions, all the way to full-blown solipsism. Consequently, Russill chooses to emphasise James's occasional acknowledgements of the need for *abstraction* as a means of making sense of a potentially disorganised world; reflection is needed in order to categorise "the original flux of life" (James 1905a, p. 29). In particular, Russill approves of the way James accounts for the need of active grouping and organisation by an agent in "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing".

Experiences come to us on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of incommensurable relations that we can not straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all. But how the experiences *get themselves made*, or *why* their characters and relations are such as appear, we cannot begin to understand. (James 1905b, p. 180)

This statement raises a number of questions. Firstly, it is not clear that the claim is at all compatible with the basic tenets of radical empiricism, as James appears to postulate abstraction as a *necessary* ingredient in a meaningful world. It is at any rate difficult to see how philosophers – and people in general – would be able to produce sensible discourse without appealing to such concepts. Yet, James does not approve of treating these indispensable abstractions and universals as *real* in any substantial sense. Secondly, it seems to introduce a dualistic distinction between knowing subject and known object – the kind of separation James definitely wants to abolish from philosophical parlance. However, given James's particularistic assumptions, the only way to avoid such a dualism seems to be to introduce a rather awkward way of talking about experiences knowing other experiences (see, e.g., James 1904a, p. 539).

Nonetheless, Russill argues that James has identified a key problem of and for communication. When the epistemological question of how two minds can know the same thing is reconstructed on the basis of the problem of incommensurability, the

discrimination between subjects and objects is seen to be an outcome of cognitive activity performed for certain purposes rather than a hard and fast reality waiting to be discovered. Employing Deweyan terminology, Russill claims that such distinctions are made “in the process of coming to know and resolve a problematic situation” (Russill 2005b, p. 290).

Thus, setting out from radical empiricism, the central question of communication can purportedly be articulated in terms of incommensurability. We live in a world of sundry, seemingly incompatible relations, and are faced with the difficult challenge of pragmatically coordinating our activities in an often hostile environment. In Russill’s account, this situation is presented as the basic setting for the construction of a communication theory in the pragmatist mould. Since communication is to take place in a sphere marked by incommensurable relations and abstractions, the emphasis is shifted from subjects striving to know an object to natural beings engaged in social and purposive activity. As Craig (2007) summarises the matter, “the pragmatist tradition conceptualizes communication in response to the problem of incommensurability – that is, the problem of cooperation in a pluralistic social world characterized by the absence of common, absolute standards for resolving differences” (p. 131). We might conclude that James’s radical empiricism provides Russill’s reconstruction of the pragmatist tradition with a worldview and initial ontology; it is a universe of indeterminacy and pluralities, or rather a “pluriverse” (James 1909).

Before we move on, some additional remarks on radical empiricism and Russill’s interpretation of James are in order. It is at least worth noting that radical empiricism is meant to be a philosophical framework that would privilege neither physical nor mental language, but rather allow for plural descriptions of one and the same thing. Consequently, the world might be described in the terms of natural science, of the humanities, or of religion, without one necessarily holding sway over the others. Such a pluralism would not conflict with Russill’s approach, but it appears to place the problem of incommensurability on a different level than in his discussion. But then, it *is* admittedly rather difficult to grasp what James means by incommensurability. In the passage cited above, pure experience, as such, is marked by incommensurable relations; abstractions and classifications are needed to overcome basic incompatibility and enable intelligent discourse. This, again, indicates that incommensurability is a fact of given experience rather than of descriptive frameworks, and that abstractive activity may be driven by a need to overcome a felt disjunction in the experiential sphere. In fact, Russill suggests that this is the proper upshot of radical empiricism: a conception of a world full of seemingly incommensurable relations, which nonetheless are not beyond debate and inquiry. He contrasts this position to those of two influential intellectuals influenced by pragmatism.

...contra Rorty, there is no absolute or necessary incommensurability implied by James’s position, nor, contra Habermas, can the problem be overcome once and for all. Demonstrating incommensurability is not the theoretical goal or end of James’s position; it is a practical beginning. (Russill 2005b, p. 291)

Indeed, recovering James is only a practical starting point for Russill’s project; his goal is to show that it provides a suitable basis for understanding and developing later pragmatist approaches to communication. Most decisively, Russill (2005b, p. 296) argues that the second-generation pragmatist Dewey accepts James’s radical empiricism, endeavouring to build a philosophy based on the “metaphysics of the incommensurable”.<sup>7</sup> This is a strong thesis that is difficult to substantiate. Given Dewey’s emphasis on community and his

rather euphoric praise for communication, it seems somewhat questionable to speak of such a metaphysical commitment. However, if Russill means merely to say that Dewey approves of James's struggle against a deterministic world-view, and that such an acceptance of objective indeterminacy facilitates the development of a pragmatist tradition of thinking about communication, then the claim appears more plausible. It seems at least possible to maintain that the communication theories of Dewey and Mead can be viewed as means for making a shared perspective available against the backdrop provided by the problem of incommensurability in experience (Russill 2005b, p. 298). On the other hand, it is not quite clear whether Russill thinks that incommensurability is primarily a feature of pure experience or of abstraction; that is, his account wavers between a metaphysical stance and a more conventional kind of epistemic or social constructionism. In his discussion of Dewey, the emphasis would appear to be placed on the latter.

Russill (2004) argues that communication is fully situated in James's indeterminate world by a triple contingency that is characteristic of Dewey's conception of social action. At the first level, communicative contingency entails that one agent contingently selects a message to influence another. Second-order contingency involves a joint determination of communicative content by two incommensurable perspectives, leading to a relative sameness. Triple contingency is constituted by agents in communication and the context formed by a pluralistic public containing incommensurable interests (Craig 2007, p. 132). Russill connects this to Dewey's theory of inquiry; the aim is to discover or develop a rational course of action that enables agents to overcome obstacles in a democratic and pluralistic setting. Intelligent action, "on the basis of consequences of habitual and prospective actions, creates a standpoint of action that is neither ego's nor alter's but a third perspective" (Russill 2004, p. 105). In other words, the Deweyan point of view prescribes inquiry into the consequences of certain lines of action in view of public interest as the only way to overcome the problematic situations caused by incommensurability.

Here, one may wonder whether radical empiricism, with its strong emphasis on actual experience and lack of attention to the relevance of *potential* experiential consequences, really provides an adequate platform for Deweyan pragmatism; arguably, Dewey's meliorism would be better supported by a position more sensitive to the role of imaginative abstraction in grasping conceivable effects. Yet, Russill presents Dewey's theories of inquiry and community as responses to the problem of communication – that is, incommensurability – as articulated by James.

Russill (2005b, p. 297) also points out some characteristic weaknesses in Dewey's approach, in particular its tendency to generally rate communication and community over difference. Following Peters's (1999) lead, Russill uses James's particularism, with its emphasis on individuality and difference, as a corrective to the Dewey that appears to ignore irreducible otherness in experience. Above all, Russill (2005b; 2006) criticises James Carey's reading of Dewey for privileging dialogue over difference and individuality. That is, a laudatory view of communication as community is not sufficient; it can actually be detrimental. Russill (2005b, p. 298) argues that only an account of communication linked to an account of social inquiry will succeed. However, he identifies a potential deficiency in Dewey's treatment of the problematic situations that allegedly produce investigation and transformations of practices. While the leading classical pragmatist maintains that social inquiry, which produces *publics*, is pursued in order to resolve perceived problems, his theory is restricted to rendering indeterminate situations more determinate. Therefore, Russill (2006) suggests that the pragmatist canon

should be complemented by Michel Foucault's account of problematisation as a method for rendering the determinate more indeterminate. In other words, Russill appears to be looking for conceptual tools that would allow Deweyan social inquiry to perform as an active critique, *producing* problematic situations rather than merely responding to them. Here, it is not necessary to examine Russill's proposal to complement the pragmatist tradition with Foucault, but later in our discussion we will see that there are elements in classical pragmatism, mostly ignored by Russill, which might provide the kind of platform he is looking for.

### Transformative Practices

While Russill places his discussion of pragmatism mainly in the context of debates in communication theory, Sandbothe (2005a; 2005b) chooses a more revolutionary course; he wishes to bypass or overcome traditional philosophical disputes in this sphere by espousing a Rorty-inspired neopragmatism. However, for the present discussion, Sandbothe's media philosophy is primarily of interest for its explicit criticism of Peirce, connected to Jamesian preferences that to a certain extent seem to corroborate Russill's approach.

Sandbothe (2005a, p. 78) delineates two paths for the media-philosophical project: (1) the *theoreticist* route, in which media philosophy is seen as a new foundational discipline within philosophy, taking the place of discarded alternatives such as metaphysics or epistemology, and (2) the *pragmatist* option, which does not present itself as a new foundation for philosophy; the latter is rather connected to a radical transformation of philosophy's self-image, associated with Rorty's pragmatic twist of the linguistic turn.

According to Sandbothe, theoreticism entails an "understanding of media philosophy for which theoretical reflection on the conditions of possibility for the generation of meaning and the constitution of reality have become an academic end in itself" (Sandbothe 2005a, p. 3). The theoreticist purportedly "abstracts from all *concrete* contexts of interest and all *particular* targets set by human communities" (Sandbothe 2005a, p. 82). The alternative pragmatist approach affirms the primacy of action but without thereby opposing theoretical work *per se* (Sandbothe 2005a, p. 6). Sandbothe (2005a, p. 3) advocates a media-philosophical development of neopragmatism, which purportedly "leads to the attempt to relate media-theoretically interpreted basic questions of modern philosophy to the socio-political horizons of action that guide democratic societies".

To understand the rationale and upshot of Sandbothe's neopragmatist project, it is important to recognise that he wishes to discard the long-running debate between realists and constructionists as a futile one that the pragmatic turn can overcome. By the "pragmatic turn", Sandbothe (2005b) understands "the transition to philosophical activity for which the representationalist question of our theories' reference to reality, with a view to their cognitive or truth value, is no longer central, but instead of this the anti-representationalist question of the usefulness of our thinking within the framework of concrete, historically contingent, politically and socially determined situations of action". He emphasises that it is important not to confuse this distinction with that of realism versus anti-realism. Following Rorty (1991, p. 2), Sandbothe claims that the quarrel between realist and anti-realist – that is, constructionist – epistemologies is one that could only arise *within* representationalism; under "the anti-representationalist banner cognitive feats are apprehended not as representations constructing or copying reality, but as pragmatic tools for changing reality" (Sandbothe 2005b). In Sandbothe's

and William Eddinton's (2004) terminology, this is a *deflationist* variant of neopragmatism that maintains that we should "view our knowledge as a collection of tools for the democratically-oriented transformation of reality" (p. 2); it is thus distinguished from such *inflationist* forms of pragmatism that strive to substitute an anti-representationalist epistemology for the representationalist one. Because of its commitment to radical empiricism, which entails a theory of knowledge, Russill's approach might be seen as a form of inflationism.

In contrast to constructionists, Sandbothe does not primarily ask how "reality" is constituted in mental representation; his principal question concerns how reality can be transformed by using and developing cognitive tools. To coin yet another ism, this *transformationalism* is a radicalised linguistic viewpoint, which "connects 'pragmatic' with 'transformative' in the sense of 'abnormal', 'innovative', and 'changing'" (Sandbothe 2004, p. 70); it eschews claims of universal scope, promoting the construction of new "local" vocabularies without shying away from explicit political commitments. Significantly, the basic intellectual support for this approach is found in James's philosophy. Sandbothe (2005a; 2005b) leans on James's (1907) characterisation of pragmatism as both a *method* and a *genetic theory of truth*.

As a method, pragmatism is to be understood as a tool for settling metaphysical disputes. The classic expression of this methodical approach is Peirce's *pragmatic maxim*:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (CP 5.402 [1878])

James (1898) approves of the general drift of Peirce's maxim, but maintains that it should be expressed "more broadly". However, this claim is contestable; while James does expand pragmatism in many ways, e.g. in the direction of a theory of truth and a specific philosophical world-view, he also restricts the scope of the meaning-theoretical maxim to *particular* experience. On the other hand, Sandbothe thinks that this narrowing of methodical pragmatism is a compelling reason to choose James and reject Peirce as the leading light of pragmatist media philosophy.

In contrast to James, Peirce, whose thinking by his own testimony took its point of departure from Kantian transcendental philosophy, construed the pragmatic maxim in the sense of an evolutionary conception of transcendental universalism. According to Peirce it holds not only that "the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action". But rather, going beyond this, he defines the "identity of a habit" in a transcendental manner, with a view to "how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be".

In opposition to this, for James it is the concrete and determinate, that is the particular, situationally codetermined consequences of a concept that constitutes its meaning. (Sandbothe 2005b)

The quote above reveals some of Sandbothe's reasons for ignoring Peirce and preferring James as "the more consistent pragmatist" (Sandbothe 2005a, p. 86). Terms such as "transcendental" and "universal" are abhorrent to most forms of neopragmatism; the former supposedly discloses a Kantian obsession with conditions of knowledge while the latter indicates a belief that philosophy should strive for knowledge claims of

universal scope rather than promote concrete, politically determined, and historically contingent transformations of action. Moreover, Peircean philosophy involves a suspect penchant for science and experimental thought, which James allegedly avoids. As Sandbothe (2005b) pithily declares, in “contrast to Peirce’s universalist transcendental pragmatism, which is oriented according to the model of scientific laboratory situations, James’s contextualist pragmatism can be directly applied to the multiply determined and contingently structured conditions of everyday life as well as to the strongly traditionally determined contexts of philosophy and theology”.

The genetic theory of truth, which Sandbothe commends as the second major contribution of James’s pragmatism, is a product of applying the pragmatic method, understood in a Jamesian fashion, to the concept of “truth”.<sup>8</sup> Put very simply, the “true” is simply that which works in view of a specific problem situation. A true opinion is one that manages to produce coherence among the particular experiences confronting an individual; it is an idea “that mediates between the stock [of old opinions] and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently” (James 1907, p. 60). As Sandbothe (2005b) formulates the matter, truth so understood is no longer a mysterious property attached to ideas or propositions for all eternity, but rather a mark of performance that a particular idea may acquire in a certain context.

Here, we may see how Jamesian pragmatism meets radical empiricism. His “pluralistic pragmatism” defines truth in terms of the coherence of finite experiences; the proper sense of “true” is that of an idea that works to overcome a conflict caused by a new experience. This is a radically individualistic and particularistic point of view, as that which works for a certain individual in a specific situation, in his or her field of experience, is the truth – a particular, relative, and mutable truth.

Like Russill, Sandbothe appears to approve of the way James’s philosophy deals with indeterminacy; but whereas Russill finds an acceptable pragmatist metaphysics in radical empiricism, Sandbothe is more interested in the way James’s pragmatism opens up the doors for transformative media philosophy. Sandbothe (2005b) notes that James’s individualism does not lead to moral or political resignation, but rather to a promotion of activism, in which each agent is urged to do what he or she can to advance a globally inclusive society from his or her own perspective. Yet, James retains his characteristic sensitivity to conflict, that is, to the costs of such communal progress; the implementation of certain goods inevitably leads to the repression of other goods.

Nonetheless, Sandbothe detects lingering universalist traces in James’s reflections on moral and political goods, and here Rorty comes to the rescue.

When James opens up such global horizons he by no means does this as a relativist. The “we” which James speaks of encompasses humanity and is not – as it is today, for instance, by Rorty – ethnocentrically relativized to the western world. Therein lies a universalist aspect of James’s pragmatism, one otherwise bearing a contextualist signature. The history of our network of beliefs and the development of the forms in which we live together transcends, in James’s view, all cultural differences. James proceeds – like Peirce – from the assumption that there is a uniform history of our “ways of worldmaking”. However, whereas Peirce takes the view that this uniformity is founded in an external force – one fatefully determined from outside the evolution of our beliefs, so that in the long run they guarantee realistic correspondence with a reality which itself is developing – James thinks that such correspondence cannot be assured by anything and also that it need not be assured. It suffices for James that we be concerned with the uniform

development and internal optimization of our ways of worldmaking. The question as to whether, for its part, this internal optimization is to be explained once again remains unanswered with James. A consistent pragmatic answer to this question was first provided by Rorty, who understands the generation of global coherences ethnocentrically as being the dissemination through media transmission of political vocabularies developed in western industrial nations in the Enlightenment age in Europe and America. (Sandbothe 2005b)

Thus, Rorty's straightforward "ethnocentrism" is the only consistent pragmatist alternative in Sandbothe's view. Instead of looking for a universally acceptable stance, we should argue for what is best in the set of opinions and values that we happen to have been born into, and strive to transform existing practices in a piecemeal manner, with no claim to universal or eternal authority. Sandbothe's own specific contribution to the neopragmatist mission is the emphasis on new media as an arena for transforming political vocabularies and practices. Drawing additional support from Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, Sandbothe (2005a) articulates his primary anti-theoreticist "guiding maxim" as follows: "pragmatic media philosophy should avoid building up the words 'medium' and 'media' as key epistemological concepts with which the puzzles of the epistemological or linguistic tradition can now – finally – be solved after all, and should instead pay attention to the concrete use that we make, or don't make, of media in certain contexts of action" (p. 88). That is, the media should be approached as tools of worldmaking, connecting people and disseminating ideas – but always in view of political and historical context.

Sandbothe goes on to articulate his media-philosophical programme in some detail, linking representationalism to a book-printing tradition and anti-representationalism to an emerging new media culture, which opens up new arenas of transformation. In other words, Sandbothe seems to employ *media-ecological* (that is, *medium-theoretical*) arguments to support his contention that the present historical period is marked by a media constellation conducive to certain modes of thought and action (cf. Lum 2006; Strate 2006). If this reading is correct, then the new wave of pragmatism can be viewed as a product and a response to changes in the media environment (in the broad sense) as well as a source of tools for transforming the cognitive ecology that restricts and enables human action.

While it would be of interest to examine this form of progressivism further, we may halt here; we now have the materials we need to grasp the starting points and aims of Russill's and Sandbothe's pragmatist projects, and to understand their grounds for bypassing Peirce in favour of James. Indeed, in the lengthy passage cited above, Sandbothe reveals one of the foremost reasons for the neglect of Peircean pragmatism: its adherence to realism.

### Consequences of Realism

While neither Russill nor Sandbothe have primarily set out to criticise Peirce, their respective ways of approaching the pragmatist tradition expose or suggest several potential weaknesses in Peircean pragmatism. In the final part of this paper, we will review some central critical points, and see whether we can find Peircean resources capable of meeting the implicit and explicit challenges. Admittedly, the relatively conventional scholarly framework of this discussion is more suited as a reply to Russill's reconstruction of the

pragmatist tradition than as a counterproposal to Sandbothe's media-philosophical activism, but reflections on what kind of pragmatism may prove most useful in the future should not be without interest for the latter.

The principal criticisms of the Peircean position may be conveniently summarised as follows:

1. Peirce advocates transcendental universalism.
2. As radical empiricism provides pragmatistic communication theory with an adequate starting point, Peirce is simply not needed.
3. Peircean pragmatism is realistic and therefore ill suited as a philosophical framework for critical communication studies.

Let us consider each of these claims in turn.

### *Avoiding Transcendental Universalism*

One of Sandbothe's sharpest criticisms is that Peirce's Kantian pedigree twists his pragmatism into a transcendental doctrine. Peirce advocates the robust view that "the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action", but then he defines "habit" in terms of how it *would conceivably* lead us to act in probable or even improbable circumstances, rather than in terms of how it *will* cause particular action in concrete contexts. Thus, the meaning of a concept is defined in terms of conceivable practical consequences – the possible actions that the conceptual habit entails – and is not limited to specific effects that will occur in the life of an individual. Therefore, Sandbothe concludes that Peirce betrays his pragmatist insight because of an unfortunate transcendental yearning for universal meaning; Peirce's pragmatic method is not limited to particular experiential consequences for concrete, situated agents. To make matters worse, Peirce defines "truth" and "reality" in terms of a final opinion that is *fated*. This is allegedly a transcendental approach, for the concepts are unpacked in terms of conditions for inquiry.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Peirce at times appears to affirm a more metaphysical interpretation of this "convergence view". According to this position, external forces will in the long run compel any genuine inquirer to the one true opinion, a representation of the real.

Sandbothe is partly right but mostly mistaken. It is true that Peirce's philosophy has its roots in Kant, and some of his early writings can be said to be Kantian in a broad sense. Sandbothe is also correct in noting that Peirce's first pragmatist essays contain remnants of transcendental philosophy. However, as Peirce's thought develops, it moves away from Kant, and transcendentalism is eschewed.<sup>10</sup> This is unambiguously expressed in the following illuminating passage:

I do not admit that indispensability is any ground of belief. It may be indispensable that I should have \$500 in the bank – because I have given checks to that amount. But I have never found that the indispensability directly affected my balance, in the least. When a hand at whist has reached the point at which each player has but three cards left, the one who has to lead often goes on the assumption that the cards are distributed in a certain way, because it is only on that assumption that the odd trick can be saved. This is indisputably logical; and on a more critical analogous occasion there might be some *psychological* excuse, or even warrant, for a "will to believe" that such was really the case. But all that logic warrants is a *hope*, and not a belief. It must be admitted, however, that such hopes play a

considerable part in logic. For example, when we discuss a vexed question, we *hope* that there is some ascertainable truth about it, and that the discussion is not to go on forever and to no purpose. A transcendentalist would claim that it is an indispensable “presupposition” that there is an ascertainable true answer to every intelligible question. I used to talk like that, myself; for when I was a babe in philosophy my bottle was filled from the udders of Kant. But by this time I have come to want something more substantial. (CP 2.113 [c. 1902])

As Peirce here admits, he has altered his position; where he used to speak of truth being fated, he now refers to it as a *hope*. Indeed, a careful study of Peirce’s original pragmatist essays shows that he later revised these texts, actually crossing over words like “fate” and “destiny” and replacing them by “hope”. Admittedly, Peirce sometimes speaks of the final truth as a rational assumption entertained by all genuine inquirers or as a requirement of logic; but this must be taken in a weaker, non-transcendentalist sense. The key here is the reference to the aims that motivate inquiry in a community.

We cannot be quite sure that the community ever will settle down to an unalterable conclusion upon any given question. Even if they do so for the most part, we have no reason to think the unanimity will be quite complete, nor can we rationally presume any overwhelming *consensus* of opinion will be reached upon every question. All that we are entitled to assume is in the form of a *hope* that such conclusion may be substantially reached concerning the particular questions with which our inquiries are busied. (CP 6.610 [1893]; cf. NEM 4:xii-xiii)

Observe that Peirce here prefers to speak of *particular* investigations. The hope concerning *each* case is then generalised, by a cognitive leap, so as to be stated as the law of excluded middle, applicable to *all* cases (NEM 4:xiii [1913]). This constitutes the basis of the idea of *one* final opinion. In spite of appearances, this hope does not require a strong commitment to total consensus; we “must look forward to the explanation, not of all things, but of any given thing whatever” (W 6:206 [1887-8]). In other words, the drive toward concord, systematised as “science”, is connected to the felt need to find a generally acceptable resolution to certain problem situations. As Peirce notes, processes of inquiry and communication do not only rely on a sufficient but inevitably vague common ground of experience; they also require differences in the experiential assemblages of individuals – the kind of divergences that Russill identifies as “contingencies” – in order to develop (see Bergman 2007). Universal consensus would be a state of permanent habits and stagnation.

There is no transcendental guarantee for truth; Peirce actually maintains that it may very well be that there is no such thing as “truth” in the absolute sense (SS 73 [1908]; MS 655:26-27 [1910]). On the other hand, the conception of truth emerges naturally in contexts of doubt, belief, and inquiry. What we believe in, we hold for true; consequently, in striving to fixate belief, we are already looking for truth. So far, Peirce’s position agrees with the Jamesian point of view, but he would add the requirements of sufficient time and effort; “when I say that a given assertion is ‘true’, what I mean is that I believe that, as regards that particular assertion, [...] sufficiently energetic, searching, and intelligently conducted inquiry, – could a person carry it on endlessly, – would cause him to be fully satisfied with the assertion and never to be shaken from this satisfaction” (MS 655:27 [1910]).

On the other hand, Peirce stresses the need to acknowledge the public or social – indeed, *moral* – dimension of truth.

Unless truth be recognized as *public*, – as that of which *any* person would come to be convinced if he carried his inquiry, his sincere search for immovable belief, far enough, – then there will be nothing to prevent each one of us from adopting an utterly futile belief of his own which all the rest will disbelieve. Each one will set himself up as a little prophet; that is, a little “crank”, a half-witted victim of his own narrowness. (SS 73 [1908])

It is important to realise that Peirce’s point of view provides no transcendental support for truth; as he stresses, his public conception is a mere definition of the *meaning* of “truth”, and not any kind of bedrock of infallible *a priori* knowledge. In fact, the interesting question here is whether the conception of inquiry implied by Peirce’s fallible but general conception is preferable to the ethnocentric viewpoint espoused by Rorty. In a sense, it is a matter of two competing ethical perspectives; but the Peircean alternative cannot be dismissed by simply branding it “transcendental”.

However, Sandbothe may mean something different by “transcendental”, namely Peirce’s tendency to define “meaning” as something that transcends particular experience. If this is the kind of “universalism” that Sandbothe has in mind, then Peirce must plead guilty. However, the Peircean viewpoint is arguably more nuanced than the neopragmatist critics realise. Peirce maintains that

...man is so completely hemmed in by the bounds of his possible practical experience, his mind is so restricted to being the instrument of his needs, that he cannot, in the least, mean anything that transcends those limits. The strict consequence of this is, that it is all nonsense to tell him that he must not think in this or that way because to do so would be to transcend the limits of a possible experience. (CP 5.536 [1905])

How does this viewpoint diverge from the Jamesian stance, which according to Sandbothe (2005b) only considers “concrete” and “determinate” consequences to be meaningful? Overlooking minor discrepancies, the central point of contention seems to be Peirce’s usage of terms such as “conceivable” or “possible”, which indicates a conception stretching beyond the particular experiential limits set by James. We will see that this is indeed a difference that makes a difference; but for now it is sufficient to note that Sandbothe’s austere, James-inspired neopragmatism reduces experience to actual experience. Classical pragmatism of the Peircean kind does not.

### *Beyond Pure Experience*

Sandbothe’s explicit criticism is mostly quite easy to rebuff; it sets out from a few well-rehearsed neopragmatist clichés, ignoring all developments and nuances in Peirce’s thought. It is somewhat more difficult to motivate why a communication-theoretical reconstruction of the pragmatist tradition, such as Russill’s, would need Peirce’s contribution. The final pages of this article will suggest some reasons why the new wave of pragmatism in communication studies should genuinely consider the Peircean point of view instead of dismissing it lightly.

To a large extent, Russill bases his reconstruction of the pragmatist tradition on (1) the belief that Dewey’s philosophy builds directly on Jamesian pragmatism and (2) the assumption that the conceptions of inquiry and philosophy entailed in radical empiricism form a sufficient starting point and fertile ground for communication theory.

It is of course a fact that Dewey draws heavily on James, in particular in his early pragmatist phase. However, it seems equally clear that Peirce's role in Dewey's thought grows as time marches on; the later Dewey of *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* is arguably more Peircean than Jamesian. This gradual turn to Peirce is relatively well-documented in Dewey's writings;<sup>11</sup> it is connected to Dewey's growing appreciation of the social dimension of Peirce's theory of inquiry, something that Dewey finds definitely lacking in James (see, in particular, MW 10:77 [1916]). In fact, Dewey explicitly acknowledges his debt, and extols Peirce as "the first writer on logic to make inquiry and its methods the primary and ultimate source of logical subject-matter" (LW 12:17 [1938]).

Consequently, Russill's reconstruction of the pragmatist tradition ought to be augmented by a recognition of Peirce's role as a major influence on Dewey. Indeed, in view of the weight Russill correctly places on the connection between Dewey's theories of communication and inquiry, this addition would seem to be rather natural.

Furthermore, Russill's (2005b, p. 298) claim that Dewey's theory of knowledge could build upon the universe of James's radical empiricism is questionable. Recall that Jamesian empiricism limits philosophical constructions to elements directly experienced, including relations. That is, philosophy should always be grounded in particular experience, and whatever is not so substantiated ought to be discarded as superfluous. However, one should query whether such a conception of experience and philosophy is truly the most satisfactory one for pragmatist communication theory. As we have already noted, James's theory requires a strict adherence to direct experience, which it abruptly and uncomfortably abandons to acknowledge the role of abstraction. Radical empiricism finds itself ill equipped to handle the general conceptions ("universals") needed to make sense of the world. Strictly speaking, they should be limited to direct experience, if they are to be allowed in philosophical discussion at all; yet, as transcending particular experiences, they are shady intellectual constructions – necessary evils, perhaps. Here, Peirce's approach may provide an attractive alternative.

Peirce argues that we "must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy" (CP 5.265 [1868]). This means *experience* in the full sense, the "total cognitive result of living" (CP 7.538) – a product of the fact that we are acting, intelligent beings in a world that often provides obstacles to our actions and surprises to our expectations. Experience is a product of certain transactions (to borrow a term from Dewey); as Peirce notes, the "very etymology of the word tells that [it] comes *ex perito*, 'out of practice'" (MS 681:3 [1913]). While he agrees with James that philosophy cannot transcend experience, his conception of experience is arguably richer. In a sense, Peirce's conception of experience is less pure than that of James; it is tainted by practices and habits.

In a criticism of Hegelian philosophy, Peirce asserts that philosophy ought not to start out from pure ideas, "vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation" (CP 8.112 [c. 1900]).<sup>12</sup> While philosophy must in a certain sense set out from everyday experience, its primary goal is not to construct worlds from empirical atoms (things and relations), but rather to analyse how experiences connect to conceptions and habits of action, and – most importantly – how such habits can be criticised and reformed.

One reason, then, to prefer Peircean to Jamesian pragmatism as a framework for communication studies is that the former does not require that the world be constituted by particular experiences. Peirce's conception of experience is broader, and more naturally placed in a context of habits of action. Furthermore, by not restricting experience to

directly perceived things and relations, but including the conceivable within the experiential domain, Peirce leaves room both for a plausible variant of realism and paves way for a philosophy that is not restricted to description – as James’s radical empiricism should be, were it to adhere to its own principles. In other words, Peircean pragmatism encompasses an explicitly normative dimension. It remains to be seen what this entails, and whether it is a debilitating weakness or a potential strength.

### *Engendering Critical Inquiry*

Of all the criticisms of Peirce emanating from contemporary pragmatists, accusations of “metaphysical realism” are probably the most popular. This is not entirely unfounded; some of Peirce’s realist proclamations positively invite such charges. Most conspicuously, his defence of “scholastic realism” and the reality of universals frequently troubles pragmatists. No doubt, given Russill’s and Sandbothe’s approval of Jamesian particularism, these kinds of concerns may partly explain the neglect of Peirce in the new wave of pragmatism. It does not seem too far-fetched to speculate that his realistic leanings, connected to the perception of realism as antithetical to critical inquiry, may be the main obstacle for a broader acceptance of Peircean points of view in contemporary communication studies informed by pragmatism.

Here, we cannot review the extensive debates that circle around Peirce’s scholastic realism; nor is it possible to examine the complex relationship between pragmatism and realism in any depth. Instead, let us consider how Dewey chooses to approach Peirce’s scholastic realism. Dewey notes that

Peirce repeatedly expresses his sympathy with scholastic realism as against nominalism and conceptualism. In so doing, he interprets the *Universalia* as natural operations, holding that the weakness of the other two theories arises from failure to note that *ways* of action are characteristic of nature. When the principles are repeatedly used as directive principles of operations, their consequences become more coherent and continuous; thereby existential material becomes more *reasonable*. Failure to note this latter point is the chief thing Peirce had against the pragmatism of James, both using test by consequences. (LW 11:108 n. 4 [1936])

Dewey interprets Peircean scholastic realism as the doctrine that universals are natural operations, more specifically ways of action characteristic of nature (in the broad sense that includes culture). In other words, they are habits. Understood in this naturalistic fashion, scholastic realism appears less stiff and “medieval”; indeed, Dewey indicates that this kind of realism is directly connected to the rational improvement of habits, and suggests that this is one reason to prefer Peirce to James. Dewey even contends that Peirce “was much more of a pragmatist in the literal sense” than James. Whereas the latter emphasised action as a means, the former viewed habits of reasonable action primarily as ends – and as Dewey notes, “ways of acting are immensely more important than is any particular result effected by action” (LW 11:483 [1937]).

However, Dewey’s position is somewhat muddled. Thus, it is useful to take several steps back and return to the roots of habit-realism in Peirce’s account of inquiry in “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878). In these articles, Peirce offers an influential theory of the emergence of inquiry. In this naturalistic account, beliefs are connected to habits of action, law-like dispositions to behaviour, which form the core of the cognitive agent. If such habits function well, there is no need to question beliefs or to look for new plans of action; it is a state of bland normalcy. But

of course, active agents encounter resistances and surprises, which cause genuine doubt of beliefs and underlying habits of action. This is the root cause of inquiry, the aim of which is to establish new, more functional, habits of action.

Now, the significance of this account for present concerns lies in its simultaneous affirmation of the reality and modifiability of habits. In Peirce's parlance, actions performed here and now are not rational. Strictly speaking, they are not even intelligible, but can only be understood within a wider perspective of practice. But conduct, conceived as a *kind* of activity, displays the characteristics of mind and intelligence (Bernstein 1965, p. 77; cf. CP 8.315 [1909]). While "action" refers to something particular, "conduct" entails habituality; it is a form of action, which is rooted in natural, social, technological, and purposive contexts. That is, while every action has a cause, conduct is always connected to some purpose, no matter how trivial. Conduct entails reasons, which can be contemplated and evaluated. One of the central claims of Peirce's pragmatism is that rational cognition and rational purpose are inseparably connected (CP 5.412 [1905]).

The habitual setup of a human being is determined by natural dispositions as well as past actions and experiences; the present situation can only bring forth surprises beyond our control. But the perspectives of human beings are not restricted to the past and the present; as intelligent subjects, they are also capable of temporal projection and a certain level of control of future events.

We cannot certainly control our past actions, and I fancy it is too late to control what is happening at the very instant present. You cannot prevent what already is. If this be true, it is true that when we act, we do act under a necessity that we cannot control. But our future actions we can determine in a great measure; can we not? (EP 2:245 [1903])

According to Peirce, such control is achieved by comparison between actions, norms, and ideals (EP 2:245-55 [1903]). That is, present modes of conduct, be they primarily habits of action, of thought, or of interpretation, are judged on the basis of their purpose and their projected consequences. This reflexive deliberation is a complex process, which is performed on many different levels of abstraction. First, earlier actions may be evaluated in relation to certain previously given norms and ideals, but in subsequent deliberation the norms and ideals are compared to each other, so that resolves about future ideals of conduct are formed (CP 8.320). Ideals may be subsumed under more general ideals, and reformed in light of the new perspectives that emerge; there is virtually no end to this critical process. However, such reflexion is not extraordinary; it is simply the manner in which any human being gains control over his or her own actions, in everyday conduct as well as in more abstract endeavours. Ideals may be more or less comprehensive, but truly deliberate conduct is produced under the influence of an ideal, which is found to be adequate and attractive after severe criticism (EP 2:377-8 [1903]). In other words, human beings do not merely accept the standards of their social surroundings; they can to some extent modify their habits through self-criticism. In this sense, the human subject is capable of self-control.

This brings us to one reason for Peirce's insistence that the pragmatic method not be limited to particular, concrete, and determinate consequences. For criticism and the development of ideals, *imagination* – that is, the capacity to project consequences into the probable and improbable future – is crucial. Habits of action are real, and contain potentialities that transcend actual experience, but not possible experience. *Pace* James, universals may be abstractions, but some are nonetheless real – and not mere nominal

postulates – as they prove themselves in the test of experience. In spite of appearances, it is Peirce that stands out as the true pragmatist in this respect; if the general habit proves to be indispensable in practice, now and in the future, it is at least as real as any directly experienced thing or relation. This is *fallibilistic* realism; at no point is the reality of any universal absolutely certain, as the future may bring surprises. But as we live in the more or less vague conviction that some general conceptions are real, realism with regard to “universals” – that is, general habits instantiated as conceptions – is a pragmatically compelling position, finding additional support in the hope of attaining knowledge that drives inquiry.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Jamesian particularism is ill equipped to handle abstraction, Peircean pragmatism acknowledges ways of abstracting as possible realities, instead of denigrating them as rationalistic fictions that for some inexplicable reason are needed to make sense of things.

It is the consequences of general habits that make it feasible for human beings to project meaning into the future, inquire, and experiment; arguably, a crucial task of pragmatist investigation is to trace the hypothetical effects of adopting and adapting certain habits, and to work for their general implementation where it seems useful and justified. Following this path, the Peircean conception of scientific philosophy, suitably adjusted and elaborated, might prove to be a fertile framework for critical inquiry.

On the other hand, Peircean pragmatism is hardly hospitable to transformative activism in Sandbothe's sense. Peirce argues that philosophy should *not* serve short-term practical needs or limited group interests. It aims at general knowledge (which may again lead to accusations of “universalism”). However, rather than merely accepting the status quo of common sense and waiting for problematic experiences to occur, Peirce's *critical common-sensism* undertakes to investigate beliefs that could not be doubted in the ordinary flow of life. This understanding of *laboratory* inquiry distinguishes it from James's particularism, which restricts its scope to actual experience. While there is no way to reject beliefs and prejudices *in toto*, the aim of Peirce's normative philosophy is to systematically criticise significant aesthetic, ethical, and semiotic habits with the hope of improving the capacity of intelligent beings to meet novel experiences. Thus, it would seem that his approach might provide space and means for *problematism*, understood as inquiry that does not merely resolve problematic situations, but actively introduces them with the hope of developing habits (cf. Russill 2006; 2007).

Admittedly, these remarks remain programmatic, at best. However, we have now seen how some of the explicit and implicit criticism of the new wave pragmatists can be met; and it has been suggested how a Peircean point of view can avoid some of the difficulties of Jamesian particularism while promoting a critical conception of pragmatism. Crucially, we have seen that realistic pragmatism cannot be divorced from concerns with inquiry. Thus, it seems only appropriate to conclude this brief critique of the new wave of pragmatism with some words from Dewey: “I can not close without inquiring whether recourse to Peirce would not have a most beneficial influence in contemporary discussion” (MW 10:78 [1916]).

## Notes

1. This paper was originally presented in the working group for Media and Communication Theory at the NordMedia 2007 conference in Helsinki. I wish to thank the participants for a stimulating and useful discussion. I am also grateful to Chris Russill and Mike Sandbothe, who have kindly read the text and confirmed that I have not grossly misrepresented their views (which does not mean that they would have

- been fully persuaded by my arguments, of course). Their constructive attitudes stand out as admirable exemplars of the pragmatist spirit of inquiry.
2. I prefer to speak of a “new wave of pragmatism” rather than of “neopragmatism”, because some of the advocates of pragmatist ideas are consciously turning to *classical* pragmatists, such as William James and John Dewey, rather than to *neopragmatists*, such as Richard Rorty, in their attempts to re-evaluate the significance of pragmatism for the field. (For further evidence of a turn to pragmatism in communication studies, see, e.g., Jensen 1995; Langsdorf & Smith 1995; Perry 2001; Peters 1999.)
  3. Russill has thus far presented parts of his reconstruction in a series of articles (2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007). These essays build and improve on a framework articulated in his dissertation (2004).
  4. Albeit not beyond criticism, Dewey’s approach arguably stands at the centre of pragmatism in both Russill’s and Sandbothe’s accounts. On the other hand, it is of interest to note that John Durham Peters, a communication scholar with definite pragmatist leanings, tends to prefer Jamesian dualism to Deweyan dialogism (see Peters 1999).
  5. For a useful article-length overview of pragmatism (albeit with bias for the Peircean variant), see Haack 2004. For an overview of pragmatist thought from a communication studies perspective (albeit with a bias for James and *neopragmatism*), see Simonson 2001.
  6. See Bergman 2000 for an attempt to present Peirce’s theory of signs in a manner conducive to communication inquiry in a pragmatist spirit. Bergman 2004 is a more thorough philosophical analysis of the communicative underpinnings of *semeiotic*.
  7. This is a term employed by Russill; Dewey actually speaks of the “metaphysical mathematics of the incommensurable” (MW 11:53). I am grateful to Russill for providing me with this reference. However, in view of the context, it remains far from clear that Dewey would be engaged in the kind of project outlined by Russill.
  8. James’s theory of truth has of course been the object of extensive debate; in this process, many *neopragmatist* defenders as well as analytical opponents of James have chosen to focus on his most rhetorical articulations of the theory, ignoring complications, nuances, and connections to Peirce’s belief-doubt model. Here, I merely discuss Sandbothe’s understanding of James’s controversial theory.
  9. An explicitly transcendental variant of this position has been developed by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas.
  10. Possibly, Sandbothe’s reading is influenced by the dated but lingering interpretation of Peirce’s development as a movement from an early naturalism to a later idealism (repeated by Garrison [2001], for instance). Although it is true that Peirce occasionally associates his later “pragmaticism” with Hegelian ideas, his particular brand of idealistic philosophy is neither opposed to moderate naturalism nor “absolutistic” in a metaphysical sense. Arguably, the term “idealism” is too vague and burdened by history to be of much use here.
  11. See Colapietro 2004 and Prawat 2001 for illuminating discussions of the Peircean influence on Dewey; but see also Garrison 2001, in which a rather different reading of the relationship is defended.
  12. Cf. endnote 10.
  13. A Peircean critic might object that this account softens Peirce’s realism beyond recognition. After all, does not Peirce insist upon a definition of the “real” as that which is such as it is and is not affected by what any human being thinks about it? Does he not explicitly reject the conception of truth as mutable? Yes, he does. Of course, this indicates the need for a more extensive discussion of the nuances of Peircean realism. However, the habit-realism advocated in this article *is* compatible with the basic Peircean definition; if an agent has adopted a habit, then he or she *would* act in a certain manner in certain circumstances, no matter what any human being (including the agent) happens to think. As an ideal, the idea of the “real” indicates the aim to establish habits that would stand the test of time – we might speak of “final habits”. Yet, in spite of their reality as “would-bes”, habits are certainly not immutable; if they were, inquiry would be pointless.

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