Two pragmatisms: Habermas and Rawls on justice

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INTRODUCTION

I start from the realization that pragmatism is an unstable sign, with different meanings for different communities and in different contexts of application. I go on to identify two main conceptions: pragmatism as a particular, if contested tradition in American philosophy, and pragmatism as a substream in the longer history of ideas. At the intersection between philosophy and communication research, a key question – thematized by this conference – is *whether* and, if so, *how* pragmatism might be characterized as a philosophy of communication, or even *the* philosophy of communication. The general idea of communication returns science and scholarship to issues on the scale of Descartes' *cogito*: I take the motto of pragmatism to be *erro, ergo sum* (Jensen, 1995: 191; 2010: 19) – I err, therefore I am, always in relation to something else, the natural environment, social circumstances, and other humans that I depend on in communication, anticipating both collaboration and contestation.

The main portion of this paper addresses the place of communication in different variants of pragmatism; my aim is to prepare a number of premises and arguments for reinvigorating normative communication theory. Communication is an inherently normative practice. At stake is not just what we think we know, or what we mean to say, but the beliefs that we are prepared to act on – as individuals, families, communities, nations, cultures, or species. The last part of paper briefly compares Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls on a classic issue of normative communication theory and political philosophy: justice. I consider Habermas as an explicit, but ambivalent pragmatist, and Rawls as an implicit pragmatist in the longer substream, whose potential for normative communication theory remains to be tapped.

PRAGMATISM AS TRADITION

The first conception of pragmatism is consensually associated with three American pioneers – Peirce, James, and Dewey – and less consensually with a range of other thinkers who, together, could be seen to administer the same 'tradition,' in some sense of the word. While contemporary researchers may take inspiration from several sources of pragmatism, they also tend to give priority to one author or source of the tradition. In her recent history of American pragmatism, Cheryl Misak (2013) identified two main roads of inquiry originating from Peirce and James, respectively.

Pragmatism has been introduced into communication research, so far, in rather limited and selective ways, often with specific reference to one of the founding figures. In Perry's (2001) important volume on pragmatism and communications, Pete Simonson's (2001) introduction identified several heirs who might be seen to replay the intellectual roles of founding figures. Thus, Jim Carey (1989) is heir to Dewey's understanding of communication as being constituted in and through communication; Michael Schudson (1997) joins Lippmann in questioning the romance of conversation in political and other social affairs; and John Durham Peters (1999) adopts a Jamesian perspective in opening up the idea of communication to the paranormal and non-human.

Pragmatism offers illustrative examples of the classic difficulty of interpreting and applying one or more classics. James Liszka (1998) suggested two ways of reading: priestly readings will stay close to the lines of the Text, and within an established community of interpreters, whereas prophetic readings may read between

the lines and extract unanticipated relevances far beyond a given tradition or even discipline. A case in point is Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism (e.g., Rorty, 1991a; Rorty, 1991b, 1998, 2007). Daniel Dennett (Dennett, 1982) complained that one must introduce a "Rorty Factor" in order to gauge Rorty's misrepresentation of his sources.

[slide 4]

PRAGMATISM AS SUBSTREAM

The difficulties – and the potentials – of interpreting pragmatism increase if one considers it as a substream in the longer history of ideas since Aristotle, as suggested, for instance, by the work of Bob Craig (e.g., Craig, 1989, 2007). The sources and implications point beyond what Misak (2013), in her history, referred to as "fellow travelers," from Oliver Wendell Holmes to Nelson Goodman. Guiding themes include the relationship between theory and practice, and between descriptive and normative approaches to inquiry.

If fallibilism is the human condition, the motto of pragmatism could be *erro, ergo sum*. We experience challenges, problems, and failures as individuals as well as collectives; if sufficiently grand and complex, our problems require collective solutions. Dick Bernstein (2010: 9) recently specified the guiding themes of pragmatism as "know-how, social practices, and human agency." We want to know *that* something is the case because we need to know *how* to act in relation to that something, or someone. And, our knowledge as well as our actions are embedded in and sanctioned by social practices.

Communication, in some sense of that word, is constitutive of all these processes. In research, politics, and daily life, we consider what is, what ought to be,

and what could be, in and through communication. A further question is what communication *could* be? And, is communication research, as currently practiced, equipped to address that question?

CRAIG'S JOKE

In his seminal article on the field of communication theory and the traditions constituting it, Craig (1999: 155) considered the potential role of communication studies in providing an epistemological or meta-perspective on all other disciplines:

> Might communication studies even claim to be *the* fundamental discipline that explains all other disciplines, since disciplines themselves are social constructs that, like all social constructs, are constituted symbolically through communication? Yes, of course, but only as a joke! […] The irony that makes the joke funny is that every discipline occupies the precise center of the universe in its own perspective. Communication is no exception, but communication as a metaperspective – a perspective on perspectives – may help us to appreciate the irony of our situation.

I would like to take the joke seriously, and to suggest that the *category* of communication is special even if the current *discipline* (or field) of communication research may not be anything special.

COMMUNICATION AS CATEGORY

A close cousin, even a twin, of fallibilism is communalism: as Peirce had suggested, we come to know what differences make a practical difference *in and as* communities of knowers. In this respect at least, communication is constitutive of, and a precondition for, interpersonal knowledge and collective action. Communication is also the most generic resource for considering what could be:

> Communication configures society. Communication also prefigures society, addressing what is, what is not (yet), what could be, and what ought to be done. Communication supports great leaps of the individual imagination and grand collective projects. Communication articulates alternatives and choices. Human communication constitutes a window of opportunity between chance and necessity…Communication is the human capacity to consider how things might be different. (Jensen, 2010: 5f.)

And yet, it is only recently and slowly that philosophy has been taking something of a communicative turn (Hannan, 2012).

[slide 7]

CATEGORIES AND COMMUNICATIONS

Modern philosophy stands on the shoulders of several theoretical turns with practical implications. The Copernican turn of astronomy had placed the Earth on the periphery of the universe; Kant's Copernican turn of philosophy re-installed the human subject at the center of the universe. Both of these turns followed on a Renaissance and humanist understanding of humans as the central reference point – for understanding the other things that exist in the world (what is), for refashioning these things for

human ends (what could be), and for evaluating what those ends should be (what ought to be).

In all of these regards, Kant summed up Enlightenment in the capacity – as well as the responsibility – of human beings to think for themselves: "The motto of the enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" (Kant, 1970/1784: 54). And, because different individuals will arrive at different understandings, Kant's summons anticipated a second motto: Dare to communicate! At the center of their universe, humans must develop practices and institutions of communication to enable cooperation and coexistence. Communication is a category on the order of Kant's transcendental forms of individual cognition – a precondition of knowing things in common for practical ends. Peirce's semiotics can be understood as a way of circumscribing the classic dyads of philosophy: subject-object as well as subject-subject. Signs are both cognitive and communicative categories.

[slide 8]

COMMUNICATION AND ACTION

A central element of Peirce's pragmatism is the concept of belief. In keeping with a processual notion of semiosis and a practical notion of experience, human beliefs constitute moments in the flow of consciousness toward its actualization in action. More than being a mental representation of something, belief constitutes a readiness to act in relation to that something – a situated engagement with reality. Beliefs are not neatly bounded opinions waiting to be executed. The Scottish philosopher,

Alexander Bain, was the central influence on American pragmatism regarding the inseparability of belief and action, as shown by Max Fisch (1954).

The relationship between communication and action is a complex one: communication is a kind of action, and actions communicate as they are performed. Most important in the present context, communication is a self-reflective and recursive form of action: it addresses and evaluates both the actions that communicate and the communications that enact. As forms of communication, science and scholarship deal in experimentation – thought experiments, *in vitro* experiments in laboratories, and *in vivo* experiments on nature as well as culture – in order to explore what might be in theory, and what could be in practice.

If communication anticipates potentials and actualizations, a further, general question suggests itself: what *communication* could be? How could communication inform and guide deliberations and actions bearing on social justice, in terms of classic considerations such as the Aristotelian good life, or the modern idea of equality through democracy, or contemporary concerns regarding justice at the level of the planet or the species, for instance, recent notions of climate justice (Cox, 2013: 50ff.)? If pragmatism is a, or the, philosophy of communication, where should one focus the search for answers to such questions – in the tradition of pragmatism, in the substream of pragmatism, or in some combination or reconfiguration of the two?

I indicated at the outset that the main aim of this paper is to explore different varieties of pragmatism and their potential contribution to a normative theory of communication. Anticipating actions, communication is an inherently normative practice.

[slide 9]

8

HABERMAS AS PRAGMATIST

The most elaborated, sophisticated, and influential normative theory of communication to date has been developed by Jürgen Habermas over the span of half a century – from the early historical account of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989/1962), via the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984/1981; 1987/1981) and the subsequent volume focusing on law and democracy (Habermas, 1996/1992), to more thematic treatments of the future of the nation-state (Habermas, 2001/1998) and the place of religion in the public sphere (Habermas, 2008/2005). Despite modifications along the way, the notion of an ideal speech situation sums up the premise that any communication, and any communicator, makes specific validity claims *in and of* the act of communication, which point to the ideal or utopian implications of communication for human action and social interaction. As far as Habermas is concerned, *what should be, already is*: Communication communicates its essence and potential to anyone who is able and willing to listen and to respond in kind.

At different points, and in shifting interpretations, Habermas has declared himself as a pragmatist (Aboulafia, Bookman, & Kemp, 2002). Bernstein (2010) described Habermas as a "Kantian" or transcendental pragmatist who emphasizes the primordial nature of communication. The ambiguity of Habermas' pragmatism has been especially apparent in his accounts of the originator of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce. One critic entitled an article, "Has Habermas understood Peirce?" (Tejera, 1996), and responded emphatically in the negative. Habermas might even belong, in Peirce's (1955: 155) own words, to the "kidnappers" of pragmatism.

A wider, open question is why Habermas has sought to appropriate the

pragmatist tradition into his postmetaphysical, but still transcendentalist conception of the human condition (Habermas, 1992). Historical disasters such as the Holocaust do not constitute systematic arguments for or against any particular philosophy of communication.

[slide 10]

RAWLS AS PRAGMATIST

In the mid-1990s, Habermas engaged in an extended debate with another towering figure of twentieth-century philosophy, John Rawls (Finlayson & Freyenhagen, 2011). In this debate as well as in key works (Rawls, 1971, 1999; 2005/1993), John Rawls could be seen to articulate the longer substream of pragmatism: fallibilism and communalism, "know-how, social practices, and human agency" (Bernstein, 2010: 9). Compared to Habermas' ideal speech situation, Rawls' conceptual device is the *veil of ignorance*, which captures an original position in which citizens – with minimal information – must commit themselves in advance to future social arrangements. *What could be, must be enacted* – step by step, in and through political and legal institutions and, implicitly, through communication.

Indeed, the veil of ignorance can never be lifted entirely. Here and now, individual citizens cannot have perfect insight into other citizens – or into themselves, for that matter – despite the dream of communication as "contact between interiorities" (Peters, 1999: 8f.). With a view to the future, communication must end even when the stakes are high and the consequences of plans and proposals remain intensely contested – or unforeseeable. Also communication is fallible.

Rawls has only occasionally been considered a pragmatist, as in Rorty's

(2003/1988) attempt to enlist Rawls for his own brand of neo-pragmatism (for a critique, see Bernstein, 1987). In political philosophy and ethics, Rawls almost singlehandedly set a new research agenda 40 years ago; his explicit conceptions of justice and implicit conceptions of communication might serve, this time around, to reinvigorate normative communication theory. Communication articulates concepts and procedures of justice that amount to communal and institutional responses to contingent problems. But, notwithstanding Habermas, communication ends; justice comes without guarantees. It may be time to transcend the Habermasian hegemony in normative communication theory.

[slide 11]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have identified two main conceptions of pragmatism, as tradition and as substream; I have given priority to the substream; and I have suggested that, in a pragmatist perspective, we may approach communication as a category on a Kantian order. The question is what *communication* could be and do, and what role the *field* of communication research may play in a wider communicative turn. A major blind spot of communication research has been the normative sources and implications of the mundane practice of communication. As communication theorists, we are invited by pragmatism to consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings – for example, on justice – we conceive our conception of communication to have.

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