

Presuppositions of Communicative Pragmatism

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In the context of communication theory, pragmatism has typically been portrayed as a radical alternative to received models of communicative interaction. Drawing on insights from William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, pragmatist communication scholars have argued that the pivotal function of communication is the construction of community rather than the transmission of information, while at the same time highlighting the value of pluralism instead of the ideal of objectivity.¹

Given this wide-ranging if rather vague consensus, it is notable that the one position to *explicitly* adopt the moniker “communicative pragmatism” – the philosophy of rational communication developed over many years by Nicholas Rescher – has been built on a rather different foundation, and has drawn almost the opposite conclusions from the application of pragmatist principles to questions of communicative association. Although Rescher’s account of communication has been largely overlooked – possibly because of its entrenchment in his broader theory of cognitive economy (not to speak of his simply staggering productivity) – it is arguably worth exploring as an alternative way of conceiving the lessons of pragmatism in the context of communication. According to Rescher (1998, p. 3), this approach is “Peircean in spirit”, rooted in C. S. Peirce’s economy of research.

In this article, I will first outline Rescher’s account of the basic ingredients of communication. Next, I will highlight its distinctive combination of communicative objectivity *and* pluralism, and then discuss the professed pragmatic basis of Rescher’s position. Finally, I will outline a criticism of his project.

A Normative Approach to Communication

In addition to his debt to Peirce’s economy of research – a significant component of Peircean *rhetoric* or *methodetic* – Rescher suggests that two purported aspects of Peirce’s philosophy are also supportive of the approach to communication he develops: namely, (1) the view that attention to the pragmatic properties of discourse can contribute to the resolution of philosophical problems and (2) the framing of the basic questions of communication in terms of a dialogical situation, normally involving two agents (in Rescher’s terminology, an informal contract between “sender” and “receiver”; in Peircean, usually “utterer” and “interpreter”) (Rescher, 1998, pp. 3, 46). At the same time, Rescher (1998) presents his account as a purely *normative* and *functionalistic* theory; it is not concerned with empirical investigations into particular practices and cultures, but “with an analytical inquiry into the presuppositions that govern effective communication” (p. 3). In other words, Rescher is preoccupied with such general principles and functions that purportedly govern and undergird successful communication, wherever and whenever it may occur – and his preferred strategy of justification is bluntly transcendental, arguing from the possibility of effective and optimal communication to its essential premises or presuppositional foundations.

Central to this viewpoint is the supposition that sender and receiver, in the very act of engaging in communication, tacitly assent to a set of fundamental commitments. In Rescher’s (1998, p. 4) words, there is a reciprocity of mutual assurances, in which the sender pledges to openly convey correct information (according to his/her best knowledge) as efficiently as possible, while the receiver will initially attribute good intentions and reliability to the sender, striving to interpret the sender’s message in the best light

¹ See, e.g., Craig, 2007; Danisch, 2007; Russill, 2008; Sandbothe, 2005.

possible. Here, it is important to note that such presumptions are not a matter of the particular contents of our discourse, but rather characteristics of what Rescher (1998) calls “the presupposition framework of the general context of communicative discourse” (p. 6). In other words, they are contextually indicated communicative responsibilities, operative *rules* that make communication as we know it possible.

A couple of things may be noted at this point. Firstly, Rescher’s notion of communication is basically that of information exchange. However, it is not always clear whether this is meant to be a *delimitation* of his inquiry to a strictly cognitive setting or rather an account of the true core of *all* forms of communication. This tentativeness suggests that his general claims may need qualification, at least in some communicative contexts.

Secondly, Rescher’s dialogical point of view stresses the goal-oriented and cooperative character of communicative interaction (in implicit contrast to trendier models of antagonistic communication). The sender’s personal goal is to convey information, while the receiver’s personal aim is to acquire information; but as a consequence, the parties “share a common interest in the efficient and effective transmission of information” (Rescher, 1998, p. 16). In other words, it is a *mutual benefit process*, rendered rational by the fact that it makes sense for people to cooperate in the overarching pursuit of information (Rescher, 1989, pp. 51-2; 1998, p. 25). Although knowledge is power, open communication allegedly offers more potential returns than short-term strategic pursuits of private gains through deception and secrecy, for as “long as interagents react to cooperations with some tendency to reciprocation in future situations, cooperative behavior will yield long-run benefits” (Rescher, 1998, p. 16).

Thirdly, the normativity of Rescher’s account is rooted in his contention that communication is at heart a *skill*, an ability bound by rules (Rescher, 1993, p. 138). We need not necessarily know what is going on inside the heads of our associates, but we do need to follow certain basic principles of coordination if the activity is to have any chance of success; in this respect, communication is comparable to activities such as dancing and chess. Of course, communicative interaction involves innumerable imperatives of varying degrees of dispensability and scope; but the rules Rescher wishes to unearth are essential presuppositions without which there would be no communication at all – the *sine qua non* of communicative interaction.

Yet, fourthly, Rescher acknowledges that this is an idealistic picture. Not only do actual human beings often fail to comply with the base rules of communication; natural language is also not an impeccable conduit of transmission. In Rescher’s (1998) words, it is “an imperfect resource” (p. 8), which renders transparency practically impossible; this ideal of communication is something that can at best be approached in specialised languages like those of the sciences. Communicative interaction, as such, does not guarantee a common cognitive foundation in terms of shared views of the world.

Here, one may also note how Rescher begins to depart from the familiar speech-act idea of what successful communication entails; although he often portrays the basic communicative situation in quite traditional intentionalistic terms (that is, a receiver getting what the sender wishes to transmit), he also emphasises the primacy of interpretation as well as the fact that there never is a perfect fit between intended and received message – and, crucially, that such correspondence is *neither* an indispensable criterion *nor* necessarily a target of communication (Rescher, 1989, p. 54; 1993, pp. 139-40, 148, 150). An upshot of Rescher’s approach is that communicative success can be conceptualised and measured in terms of the personal and communal *maximisation* of information.

However, this leaves Rescher with the basic problem of how to provide a convincing reply to communicative relativism and nihilism. If the means of communication – the signs we use – always obfuscate our messages to some degree, what counter-argument can we provide to the sceptic who maintains communication always fails (except, perhaps, by mistake)? And is the common world not well lost in idiosyncratic interpretations and the plurality of discursive formations?

The Objective Stance

Rescher's approach makes one significant concession to communicative scepticism, as he grants that there is no way to guarantee that the meaning intended by the sender will match the interpretation actually made by the receiver. However, he simply bypasses this worry by arguing that rational communication neither requires intersubjective agreement as a starting point nor entails consensus as an ideal goal. That is, the common ground is not fundamentally constituted by a substantial cognitive accord – or, to use Rescher's favoured term, by *shared conceptions*. According to Rescher (1993, p. 147), if consensus were postulated as a precondition of communication, the communicative enterprise would get stuck in cognitive solipsism – something that may be hypothetically imagined, but is in fact pragmatically untenable. Furthermore, consensus is too fragile to fulfil the firm functional role that Rescher demands of a fundamental presupposition; from this point of view, our conceptions, which are always open-ended and corrigible, are in fact secondary and irrelevant (Rescher, 1993, pp. 139-40). This fallibilistic perspective involves a thoroughgoing recognition of the possibility of error, applied to sender as well as to receiver. Yet, Rescher maintains that a certain kind of commonality is not only supportive but positively presupposed in communication and language use. For communication to be possible sender's and receiver's conceptions do not need to match; but they are intrinsically *committed*, as rational beings involved in the broad practice of informative communication, to objectivity.

Our concept of a *real thing* as a commonly available focus is [...] a fixed point, a shared and stable centre around which communication revolves, the invariant focus of potentially diverse conceptions. What is to be determinative, decisive, definitive (etc.) of the things at issue in my discourse is not my conception, or yours, or indeed anyone's conception at all. [...] [A] co-ordination of conceptions is nowise requisite for the possibility of communication: your statements about a thing will convey something to me even if my conception of it is altogether different from yours. To derive informative benefit from the declarations of others, we need not take ourselves to share *views* of the world, but only to take the stance that we share *the world* being discussed. The crux is a determination of ours to use whatever fair and reasonable means we can to derive the benefits of communication with others, affording them informative clues about our thinking and deriving from theirs what we can – if need be by way of conjecture and interpretation. (Rescher, 1993, pp. 140-1)

Rescher characterises the commitment to objectivity as a *conventionalised* or *fundamental intention*; it is critical for his view that this is not a matter of conception, or a result of cognition, but rather a precondition for communication and inquiry alike. The obligation in question is intentional in the sense that it is basically an attitude, a *stance* compulsory for any agent involved in communication and inquiry (which, of course, covers at least most of the human species). Moreover, Rescher (1998, p. 33) maintains that this intention is uniquely fundamental in the sense that it overrides all other communicative intentions, including any intent to achieve consensus. We do not need to have the correct idea or even reach agreement; but we must *intend* to communicate about the interpersonally accessible things of the objective order of the world, that is, real objects that are such as they are irrespective of our conceptions of them. Correspondingly, we normally attribute such a *putative* intent to others – even if we are separated from them by thousands of

years and vastly divergent scientific world-views (Rescher, 1993, pp. 144-5). This ascription of intent is not an empirical discovery or even a reasonable application of the principle of charity. The twofold objective determination “is something we postulate or presuppose *ab initio*” (Rescher, 1993, p. 145).

It is perhaps less clear in what sense the fundamental commitment is conventional; but what Rescher seems to have in mind is the contention that objectivity is an inherent presumption involved in certain general social practices (and in this respect, not strictly individual). All social projects (such as the pursuit of physics, the profession of journalism, or the game of darts) have their inherent teleology and their inner mechanisms that constrain us once we seriously engage in them (Rescher, 1989, p. 68). However, Rescher’s focus is on two interweaved enterprises – those of communication and inquiry – that play a special role as ubiquitous processes, which also implies that their teleological and normative cores are practically universal (at least for rational beings as known to us). Hence, our capacity to communicate about real things requires the “submission to a fundamental communicative convention or social contract to the effect that we *intend* (mean) to talk about the very thing itself as it really is” (Rescher, 1998, p. 33).

Accordingly, objectivity is inherently linked with community. The objective intent is a “shared feature of ‘social mind’, built into the custom-established ground rules of a social group’s use of language as a publicly available communicative resource” (Rescher, 1993, p. 145). On the one hand, the objective stance is motivated by the economy of knowledge production, it being prudent to rely on evidential resources provided by a communicative and collaborative community; but on the other hand, objectivity is also “an indispensable instrumentality for the creation and maintenance of intercommunicative community” (Rescher, 1998, p. 13). Put differently, the relation between objectivity and communication is a two-way street; through communicative interaction, the agent can benefit from others’ efforts at understanding a shared world, and by presuming the existence of a common ground, the agent fosters communicative community by producing messages that are intelligible to his/her peers (Rescher, 1998, pp. 26-7).

In other words, we effectively accept or adopt the objective stance whenever we engage in social communication, for it is “a presupposition of successful communication in matters of information-transmission that we purport (that is, claim and intend) to make true statements about the objective things at issue” (Rescher, 1993, p. 141). The crucial assumption of a commonly accessible order of things is not something learned through communication or discovered through inquiry. Such a postulation of communicative commonality is not an inductively validated conclusion, but a retrovalidated presupposition (Rescher, 1998, p. 31). In general, cognitive objectivity “represents a postulation made on *functional* rather than *evidential* ground: we endorse it in order to be in a position to learn by experience at all” (Rescher, 1998, p. 30). This objective stance entails ontological or metaphysical realism; the latter is “a functional (or regulative) presupposition” of the former (Rescher, 1998, pp. 30-1).

However, although objectivity (and realism) in this sense is pragmatically unavoidable, the adequate recognition of this minimal precondition is not without consequences for communicative practice and communication inquiry. For one thing, Rescher argues that the “imputational groundwork” of linguistic communication permits us to presuppose objectivity from the outset, and thus refute the view that the “communicative enterprise” would at heart be an exercise in theory-building with the (pragmatically impossible) ideal goal of achieving objectivity as mutual understanding or consensus (Rescher, 1998, p. 35). His position also entails that we must deliberately refrain from postulating our own conceptions as definitive, if we wish to participate successfully in communication (that is, acquire as much information as possible). Furthermore, we should avoid the temptation to view consensus as a fundament of

communication or even as a dominant goal of communicative interaction. In this way, Rescher's arguments for the objective stance turn out to be part and parcel of his defence of pluralism.

Yet, is not the possibility of future agreement a guiding principle of communication? Rescher (1993, p. 140) concedes that such a *hope* of agreement is indeed a central presupposition of the communicative venture; but he immediately reduces it to a secondary status by asserting that such a possibility is nothing but a "frail reed". At this point his argument becomes somewhat muddled, as he supports his dismissal by noting that interpretation does not require a commonality of beliefs and conceptions (Rescher, 1993, p. 149). But this strikes at the notion that *substantial* consensus would be a prerequisite of communicative interaction, not at the *procedural* contention that communication would involve the possibility of agreement as *telos*. From the fragility of the hope, it apparently follows that it cannot support "anything of substance" (Rescher, 1993, p. 140). However, is not the same true of objectivity as portrayed by Rescher?

Thus, it is not self-evident that Rescher's case against consensus constitutes a decisive argument against the kind of normative frameworks that have been erected by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. To the latter's notion that the very act of communication commits us to the goal of mutual agreement, Rescher (1993, p. 154) retorts there is no guarantee that such a procedural consensus is achievable. In his view, rationality is less ambitious. Engagement in communication does not require a utopian expectation that our innermost hopes are realisable; "experienced and realistic communicators" are at best looking for a clarification of positions, and satisfied if the end result is an improvement of their own pool of information (or, to use more Habermasian language, their understanding). Rescher further appeals to the plurality of communicative objectives; in some situations, genuine agreement may be the agents' shared goal, but in others, communication may be pursued for such less lofty purposes as phatic contact, entertainment, or deception. And seeking to strike a definitive blow, Rescher concludes "that in so far as consensus-seeking is a presupposition of rational discourse, this is so only in the *ideal* rather than the *real* order" (Rescher, 1993, p. 155).

However, here Rescher's argument slips from the purportedly firm ground of normative presuppositions to the *actual* behaviour of human beings, even appealing to the "praxis of communication as it actually exists" (ibid.). Given his avowed framework, this feels quite perplexing, for is not objectivity also an ideal? Do not experienced and fallible communicators similarly realise that perfect objectivity is an unattainable goal in the real order of things?

So why, in the end, should the *ideal* of objectivity be viewed as more fundamental than the *ideal* of mutual agreement? Rescher's answer must be that objectivity, as a presupposition of communication, is not properly characterised as a value or ideal at all, but as a more basic stance. But what, then, compels us to take the objective intention to be more fundamental to communication than the intersubjective stance; is the preference not, in the end, a matter of normative, even ethical, evaluation – or, alternatively, a question that is relative to the type of communication in question? If this were the case, the bottom would simply fall out of Rescher's presuppositional approach. Therefore, even more basic arguments for the primacy of objectivity and the inadequacy of consensus in the real order of things need to be established.

The Economy of Information

As he strives to pinpoint the differences between his own theory of communication and that of Habermas, Rescher introduces some finer distinctions into his presuppositional analysis. Agreement is characterised as a *merely regulative* presupposition of the communicative project, or "at most a retrospectively confirmed

prejudgement" (Rescher, 1993, p. 52). It is just a *defeasible presumption*² made by communicators entering into an interaction of a particular type – and therefore, not a general prerequisite of the kind Rescher locates in objectivity.

Yet, on closer inspection, it turns out that objectivity and realism are not the most fundamental factors in Rescher's account of communication. Although frequently identified as fundamental presuppositions, which are retrovalidated by their functional efficacy, objectivity and realism are purportedly grounded in even more basic pragmatic elements. Objectivity in particular emerges from – and in a sense serves – a more fundamental need, namely the primary interest to maximise information. What is more, although Rescher's line of argument quickly and elegantly transforms this rudimentary desire into a communal *desideratum*, it is, first and foremost, agent-driven.

This should not come as a surprise, given the openly economic basis of Rescher's account; communication is not merely goal-oriented, it is here construed as "a purposive transaction subject to economic principles" (Rescher, 1998, p. 12). Sender and receiver are both portrayed as information-maximising, rational agents (which may or may not be human individuals), seeking to extract as much valuable data as they can from social interactions. On this basis, "considerations of economy achieve the status of governing principles for the process of communication" (ibid.).

So, in the ultimate analysis, objectivity and realism are actually tools of information accumulation. As Rescher (1998) puts it, our "commitment to ontological objectivity [...] rests on the idealistic foundation of a mind-projected postulation whose validation is, in the end-functional and pragmatic, validated in the first instance not by evidence but by considerations of utility" (p. 36).

All this applies to communication as well. In fact, in Rescher's (1989) account, a communicative community is "a sort of marketplace with offerers and takers, sellers and buyers" (p. 49). Communicative practice is "predicated on conceding and maintaining credibility", a process guided by considerations of potential profit and cost effectiveness. A sensible agent does not extend credit and trust out of sheer generosity or because such a move would be risk-free. Yet, in comparison with a policy of total security (that is, no acceptance and no trust), the strategy of cooperation and an initial presumption of credibility offers "a better balance of potential benefits over potential costs" in the pursuit of our basic goals (Rescher, 1998, p. 18); "if we do not concede *some* credit to the declarations of others, then we lose any and all chance to derive informative profit from them, thus denying ourselves the benefit of a potentially useful resource" (Rescher, 1989, p. 51).

This, then, must be the real communicative order of things, for the economic basis of communicative interaction, as outlined by Rescher, describes the extant idealistic reality rather than an ideal universe of discourse. That is, even if it is not made explicit, *all* communicative interactions involve cost-benefit calculations, in which communicators must decide how much credit they are willing to extend to others by estimating potential losses and gains; such "communicative procedures are motivated – and justified – by the essentially profit-seeking objective of extracting the maximum benefit from our information-oriented interactions (Rescher, 1989, p. 50)

² At least once, Rescher also characterises the minimal commonality inherent in the objective stance as a "defeasible presumption" (Rescher, 1998, p. 26). This may be a slip, for "indefeasible" would seem to make more sense, especially in view of his criticism of the Habermasian viewpoint. On the other hand, it may be a sign of a certain tension between Rescher's idealism and the more pragmatic inclinations of his economic starting point.

The ultimate function of communication, and the justification of such instruments as cognitive objectivity and ontological realism, is not found in the construction of community, the altruistic improvement of cognitive interaction, or even the pursuit of knowledge *per se*; its rationale is cost-effectiveness in the service of individual interests – which, fortuitously perhaps, happen to entail the development of communal goods. Given our pragmatic need for information, the development of genuinely communicative and cooperative communities is of great value, something that rational agents ought to pursue (Rescher, 1998, p. 12). But it is important to note that this ostensibly unselfish undertaking is actually motivated by selfish information-economic interests.

If its cognitive needs and wants are strong enough, any group of mutually communicating, rational, dedicated inquirers is fated in the end to become a *community* of sorts, bound together by a shared practice of trust and cooperation, simply under the pressure of its evident advantage in the quest for knowledge.

However, this cooperative upshot need not ensue from a moral dedication to the good of others and care for their interests. It can emerge for reasons of prudential self-interest alone because the relevant modes of mutually helpful behavior — sharing, candor, and trustworthiness — are all strongly in everyone's interest, enabling all members to draw benefit for their own purposes — the agent himself specifically included. Cooperation emerges in such a case not from morality but from self-interested considerations of economic advantage. In science, in particular, the advantages of epistemic values like candor, reliability, accuracy, and the like, are such that everyone's interests are well served by fostering adherence to the practices at issue. (Rescher, 2003, p. 108)

Critical Concluding Remarks

Rescher's account of communication and its presuppositions contains several attractive features. Its biggest selling-point may be its explanation how a strong commitment to cognitive objectivity can be combined with substantial pluralism. Rescher also provides weighty arguments against communicative subjectivism (in the shape of objectively grounded fallibilism) and individualism (in the form of the communal upshot of the objective commitment).

At the same time, the above exposition of the information-economic rationale of Rescher's presuppositions suggests a number of potential weaknesses in his approach. As noted above, his view of communication is based on the idea that communicative interaction is at heart a matter of information exchange. Yet, it is not at all self-evident that all communicative practices and processes are of this nature. Rescher himself notes that agents may have many different kinds of goals in communication; why would the maximisation of information be of overriding significance in each particular case? While Rescher (1998) recognises that there are communicative contexts of varying scale, such as "everyday small talk, informative communication, fiction, journalism (serious or tabloid), and others" (p. 10), he goes on to offer an analysis in which the pursuit of information is apparently *the* goal of all forms of communication. And although he discusses the differences between two primary kinds of communication – those of everyday interaction and scientific discourse – his paradigm of communication is primarily that of natural science. This might not be all that injurious to his argument, were it not for his own criticism of Habermas's failure to provide an account of the real communicative order of things. In the end, it remains unclear whether Rescher's account should be taken as a comprehensive account of the presuppositions of all kinds of communication, as a more limited analysis of informative communication, or as an ideal model based on the best practice available to us (that is, natural science).

Furthermore, Rescher's notion of informative communication is markedly rationalistic in the sense that it builds on a model of cost-benefit analysis. Virtually at least – and perhaps even actually – communicators are here portrayed as active calculators, always busy trying to figure out how to maximise their store of information. Again, the tension between Rescher's avowed aim to provide a purely normative theory and his appeal to the actual praxis of communication causes certain difficulties. Human communication – and perhaps even more emphatically, non-human communication – is simply not as rational as Rescher suggests; it is rather a complex mix of conscious and unconscious sign processes. Drawing on Peirce and Dewey, one might even argue that deliberate and voluntary communicative interaction is the exception, and habitual and involuntary communication the norm. Arguably, the picture of the communicator as a rational agent engaged in constant computation is a utilitarian idealisation, possibly of use for specific analytic purposes, but not as generally applicable as Rescher maintains.

A more specific worry stems from the individualism inherent in the economic groundwork of Rescher's model. As we have seen, his account quite effortlessly explicates how communication, cooperation, and community emerge from purely selfish interests. However, this explanation assumes an open-ended situation, in which it is natural for an agent to put short-term desires aside in order to maximise possible benefits in the future. But this is definitely a macro-picture, which says very little about more limited contexts. It is not difficult to imagine a situation where a sender ought not to impart with specific information or ought to act deceptively – that is, if the agent in question is to act rationally and maximise his or her profit (e.g., telling a lie in order to extract lucrative information with practically no risk of getting caught). In fact, whatever ethical upshot Rescher's account seems to have is restricted to the general level; in particular cases, rational agents following the dismal economic logic will not necessarily work actively to enhance collaboration and build community.

Finally, there is the question of the viability of a presuppositional approach to communication. In spite of his self-confessed Peircean leanings, Rescher appears to have paid no heed to Peirce's stinging dismissal of "transcendental apothecaries".

...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 [1902])

This is not simply a question of whether Rescher gets Peirce right or not (which is of secondary importance here). What is worthy of note, however, is the way the some central terms in the quote above – "hope", "presupposition", and "substantial" – correspond to key concepts in Rescher's account. It almost reads as a retort to the project of communicative pragmatism, and suggests some significant differences between the two pragmatists. At least, we may conclude that where Rescher requires essential presuppositions, Peirce's logic (in the broad semiotic sense) makes do with ideal hopes. Personally, I tend to subscribe to the latter option; one of the less attractive features of Rescher's communicative pragmatism is the way it at bottom renders objectivity (and realism) into an instrument, which by the economic logic of things always outweighs (other) communicative values. This is not to say that objectivity would not be of paramount importance in communication, a key value – for many of the reasons that Rescher has identified. And, no doubt, objectivity is integrally linked to Peirce's primary interest in the pursuit of truth. The relevant

differences pertain to the level of security. With Rescher, we are assured that the “real world” rests on a necessary and a priori basis (Rescher, 1997, p. 93; and objectivity requires no further validation (Rescher, 1998, p. 45). But if we follow Peirce, we may have to come to terms with the fact that the hope for objectivity is just as frail a reed – or as strong – as is the hope for mutual understanding. They do not provide pre-given foundations; constitute ideals of communication and inquiry that may (hopefully) be approached, but never perfectly attained.

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