

Planetary pragmatism? A response to François Cooren

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Abstract. In my discussion of Cooren’s piece, I set out to accomplish three things. First, I situate Cooren within a broader horizon of pragmatist thought to discuss how his work aligns with pragmatism. Second, I examine how Cooren deploys pragmatism to constitute a scholarly field of communication theory, a project seeking to transcend the current configuration of the field by systematizing discourse around a “metamodel”. Third, I ask what else Cooren’s pragmatism might do. Pragmatism, according to Cooren, offers us an agentic conception of the world.

Keywords: Anthropocene; communication theory; pragmatism, Robert Craig

François Cooren’s inventive way of developing a pragmatist perspective has much to teach us. In “Pragmatism as ventriloquism: Creating a dialogue among seven traditions in the study of communication,” Cooren’s (2014) “ventriloquial view on pragmatism” is elaborated for a specific task: to constitute a field of communication theory as Robert Craig imagined it many years ago. It is a brave effort given the complexity of Craig’s (1999) original proposal, the requirement to engage eight traditions, and the impoverished state of critical discourse with respect to Craig’s work. Cooren’s challenge is also notable for its “agential” conception of the world, a position that requires communication theory to abandon the centrality of humans in its informing assumptions. What does it mean for communication theory to configure worlds—and perhaps even the planet—in terms of agency? What kind of pragmatism is Cooren proposing here?

In my discussion, I set out to accomplish three things.

First, I situate Cooren within a broader historical field to discuss how his work shifts the intellectual horizon for appraising pragmatism. While many scholars have sought to develop a “constitutive theory of communication” from pragmatism, Cooren (2014) sharpens a

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distinction between dialogue and situation to adapt pragmatism to communication theory by engaging a wider body of materialist theory than is usual.

Second, I examine how Cooren deploys pragmatism to constitute a scholarly field of communication theory, a project seeking to transcend the current configuration of the field by systematizing discourse around a “metamodel”.

Third, I ask *what else* Cooren’s pragmatism might do. Pragmatism, according to Cooren, offers an agential conception of the world and he encourages us to understand the constitution of communicative situations from this vantage point. The widely distributed sense of agency his project entails sounds odd, especially if contrasted to the way pragmatism is usually deployed. It helps attune us to the problem of the planetary, however, and brings new concerns within the ambit of pragmatism and communication theory.

The broader horizon of pragmatism

Pragmatism, as a philosophical tradition, can be divided into its classical and revival periods. Classical pragmatism addressed the implications of evolutionary theory and scientific inquiry for human life. The revival of pragmatism, as led by Richard Bernstein, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty in the late 1970s, recovered this philosophical tradition by advancing dialogic and conversational conceptions of communication in place of psychology, religion, evolution, and science.

The revival of pragmatism is diverse, yet often assimilated to the practical turn in discourse and language theories, which focused on speech in use, linguistic performativity, and language as implicated in particular forms of life. The main difference between classical and revivalist era pragmatists is that the emphasis on communication (about which classical pragmatists said very little) displaced the centrality of inquiry (about which classical pragmatists wrote incessantly). Second-generation revivalist pragmatists (like Craig and Cooren) have sought to bridge the classical pragmatist emphasis on inquiry with the brilliant forays into communication theory facilitated by Bernstein, Habermas, Rorty, James Carey, and others. The significance of their efforts is difficult to assess, however, given the resolutely synchronic approach of Craig and Cooren. A diachronic perspective can aid a proper appraisal.

Pragmatism originated with Charles Peirce but was brought to life by William James. Speaking broadly, James initiated pragmatism with his “objective biological approach” to psychology, which John Dewey (1930) counted as James’ greatest contribution. James’s (1890) *Principles of Psychology* connected mind to the exigencies of practical life and challenged the conceptions of consciousness, body, and experience held by philosophers and psychologists by confronting them with the results of nineteenth-century physiological experimentation. In a famous essay, “The Reflex Arc in Psychology,” Dewey (1896) extended James’ work and grounded the physiologically oriented psychology in a holistic notion of action coordination. The psychology of sensation, as well as the experimental contrivance of stimulus-response, was embedded within a broader conception of situated action. By 1898, James condensed the consequences of this approach into a philosophical principle, “the principle of pragmatism,” which he derived from Peirce’s work.

Pragmatism, for Peirce, was a corollary of Alexander Bain’s definition of belief. Beliefs were not a state of mind, a quality of consciousness, or subjective ideas, but a disposition to

act, a philosophical position on which Peirce, James, Dewey, and George Herbert Mead were in agreement. Unlike Bain, however, and unlike the other classical pragmatists, Peirce's training involved earth science, particularly geodesy, in addition to mathematics and logic. While James grounded cognition in our embodied engagement with the world, a trajectory pursued relentlessly by Dewey and Mead in their writings on functional psychology, Peirce grounded pragmatism in a stricter conception of scientific inquiry that incorporated his experiences in mapping and measuring the planet. While I agree with Cooren that there is overlap in Peirce, James, and Dewey's approach to inquiry, these different horizons for their thought are important to recognize. Cooren, in some respects, is closest to Peirce, and this may account for his emphasis on worldly agency (over against the interest of James and Dewey in subjective and biological-shaped experience). *I will return to this distinction between biological and planetary horizons to discuss the implications it has for pragmatist views of situated action.*

Pragmatism, as Cooren notes, has long helped theorists negotiate the dialectic of objectivism and relativism (see Bernstein, 1983). The practical orientation of pragmatism encouraged scholars to situate ideas, utterances, and statements as actions in the world and to avoid what Cooren calls realism or subjectivism in the assessment of the effects of these linguistic actions. Statements, like beliefs or ideas in classical pragmatism, are ways of acting in the world, yet also caught up in broader material networks. These "broader material networks", as I've called them, are typically conceived in conversational or dialogic terms by revival era pragmatists, and assessed with respect to human interests and values. Rorty, for instance, felt that all the distinctions and problems facing humans were language-dependent and thus embedded within contingent vocabularies. These vocabularies were mutable human constructions that should be evaluated as tools that advance (or fail to advance) particular purposes. While Rorty's work contrasted sharply with Habermas' formal pragmatics on this point, as the latter theorist sought to ground a democratic conception of communication in a philosophical anthropology developed from Mead, there is surprising overlap in their basic assumption: Language is a distinctly human affair, whether it was a collection of mutable vocabularies creatively adjusted by culture-bound people (Rorty) or a biological inheritance that locked in during hominization (Habermas).

The revival era pragmatism of Rorty, Habermas, and others departed markedly from the classical tradition on this point. The conception of inquiry found in classical pragmatism presumed that surprising disruptions to our "broader material networks" involved more than human language. It was this "more than human language" assumption that discomforted many revivalists. Whether it was a suspicion that metaphysical assumptions were smuggled into classical pragmatist notions of experience (which are notoriously opaque in James, Dewey, and Peirce) or anxiety about the growing scope, complexity, and political importance of scientific practice, the revivalists were determined to ground theoretical discussion in the priority of hermeneutic and interpretive activity—a pre-theoretical commitment that always fit better with the history of continental philosophy leading to Heidegger than with classical pragmatism.

Classical pragmatism acknowledges that cognition is an active admixture of feeling, interest, value, sign, and culture—and it was not difficult for revivalists to conceptualize language in similar terms. Intelligence is distributed within the world, and the world is active

in both constituting and disturbing how our practical activities (which always involve some measure of cognition) and surrounding environment (constituted, in part, by practical activities that are partly laden with cognition) are interconnected and interdependent. The tangle of epistemological and ontological questions these sorts of general statements provoke were encompassed by the various accounts of inquiry found in pragmatism, and most of the intramural disputes in pragmatism involved how best to describe the relationship of inquiry to humans situated in a resistant world. Whether it is Peirce's reflections on the distributed aspects of scientific communities, Dewey's notion of problematic situation, or James' world of impure experience, it is clear that the resistant nature of the world disrupts our experience and leads pragmatists to connect fallibility to inquiry (as a means of dealing with failed/doubted belief). The fields capturing the interest of classical pragmatists tended to suggest a self-correcting fallibility for meeting inevitable failures posed by the uncertainty, contingency, and resistance of the world—it was why evolutionary dynamics and scientific experimentation were prized so highly.

We can now address more clearly the significance of Cooren's contrast of dialogue and situation. Pragmatism, for Cooren (2014), is a philosophy that prioritizes what “a situation requires, demands or requests” (p. 1). Situations both exceed dialogue and constitute dialogic contexts, and this broad conception of situation is Cooren's way of figuring the world in agential terms. The world, in brief, “should also be deemed as acting upon us by calling into question our beliefs or, on the contrary, by confirming them” (p. 9).

“The world, according to a pragmatist position, is therefore not mute, silent or voiceless. It is a world that tells us things, by either confirming or contradicting what we believe is the case” (p. 9).

Cooren's remarks amend the linguistic turn inflation of conversation and dialogue in pragmatist theory by incorporating an agential conception of the world. Conversational analysis, on Cooren's approach, must integrate the forcing of the world through a notion of situation. Communication theory as a broader field, Cooren argues, should do the same. It must integrate what Charles Peirce once called the brute force of secondness. Inquiry provoked by the world puts us in a communicative relation with our surroundings: “a world that tells us things...”

Pragmatism is certainly a useful philosophy for registering how the world kicks back, as Karen Barad once put it. Contemporary theory tends to incorporate this insight by refreshing vitalist notions of matter and materialism, such that the ongoing effort to challenge the asymmetry of human and nonhuman involves collapsing and distributing agency across matter. It is almost impossible to avoid a certain vitalism in expressing this position and so it is not surprising that William James and John Dewey have figured significantly among the main proponents of this materialist turn, as evidenced by the work of William Connolly, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, for example.

Cooren's call to have communication theory embrace this branching of pragmatism is timely and important. The vitalism of these materialist efforts reminds initially of the pan psychic difficulties that trapped many of James' writings on radical empiricism. Yet, as the notion of ventriloquism deftly suggests, there is no psychism in this panpsychism, and Cooren's nomination is overt in its goal to purge communication of any residual mentalism

or psychologism. By developing analytical techniques to illustrate how the world demands actions of us, and by pointing us to a conception of language and communication built on a materialism inspired by something other than the interests, agency, and practices of embodied humans, Cooren shifts the usual horizon for understanding pragmatism.

There remains the puzzle of Cooren's emphasis on "situation". It is, as William James (1904) once observed, "Dewey's favorite word," and it was used by Dewey to almost completely overturn the way theory, fact, truth, and other terminology implicated in epistemological endeavours was understood. Dewey's epistemology understands knowledge as generated and remade through the problematic situations that the resistance of the world (or the grain of things, as James put it) forces upon us. The notions of problem and problematic situation have been rehabilitated in communication theory (Russill, 2007, 2008), new materialism (Bennett, 2010), and science studies alike, yet Cooren directs us to a curious place in elaborating his meaning: the work of Peirce scholar, Cheryl Misak. Dewey, of course, is one of the few to grasp and extend Peirce's work on inquiry in significant ways, as both Misak and Mats Bergman have recognized in their brilliant work. Yet, Misak (2013) finds that Dewey introduced many awkward and unnecessarily convoluted notions in adapting Peirce, and she suggests the infelicity in Dewey's expression was generated largely by Dewey's broad and unrestrained notion of situation. Bertrand Russell, as Misak (2013) notes, would mock Dewey for a conception of situation that seemed to compass nothing "less than the whole universe" in its ambit (Misak, 2013, 122).

We risk sinking into the weeds of intramural pragmatist debates at this point and it must seem churlish to raise these matters in detail given the broader aspirations of Cooren's work. Yet, as I have indicated above, there is a tension generated by Dewey's biologically organized sense of situation and Peirce's sensitivity to cosmological phenomenon of a different temporal order, a tension we might usefully retain in seeking to register the planetary in communication theory.

The field of communication theory

Cooren seeks to prove the analytical value of his ventriloquial view—and the flat ontology it extends—by joining efforts to reimagine the field of communication theory using pragmatism, a set of debates that include Craig, Mats Bergman, Peter Simonson, Leonarda García-Jiménez, and myself, among others.

Communication theory, Craig (1999) argues, is a type of discourse abstracted from communicative practices that interest us. It is these communicative practices that underpin the field's historical emergence and give it meaning and relevance. A field of communication theory, as opposed to the aggregation of perspectives, requires scholars to recognize the diverse theories seeking to explain the world and to engage them on these terms (that is, as active in the constitution and shaping of social life).

Craig's proposal involves several kinds of abstraction. Theories are relative to traditions in Craig's account, much like the way statements are partial expressions of vocabularies in Rorty's account. One must understand theories not as a representation of reality but as expressions of a theoretical tradition organized by certain ontological assumptions about the nature of communication. In addition, Craig abstracts from the way theories gain meaning and relevance in the world in order to generate a theoretical model. Craig (1999) calls this

construct the “metamodel” and uses it to systematize how inter-theoretical engagement unfolds. The purpose of the “metamodel” is to generate a field of communication theory by constituting a public among scholars interested in the practical implications of different approaches to communication. Instead of identifying weaknesses among competitors as a prelude to advocating one’s preferred theory, scholars should instead engage broader theoretical traditions in a collaborative, reflexive, and critical way.

Cooren distinguishes his approach by noting that Craig’s metamodel is informed by Dewey’s writing on democracy and a desire to encourage public dialogue. While this is true, we should observe that Craig’s model is more an alloy than a pure expression of Dewey’s pragmatism. Gregory Bateson’s theory of logical types is at least as crucial as Dewey, and the influence of Richard McKeon is palpable (particularly his schematic method of organizing philosophical traditions). In addition, Craig’s proposal—as I read it—also acknowledges a distinction between dialogue and problematic situation, and is part of the effort to recover Dewey’s notion of inquiry from those John Peters (1999) once called, “dialogians” (p. 34). Pending a fuller discussion of “situation”, there are better ways to distinguish Cooren’s work from Craig.

The differences, I believe, reduce to Cooren’s commitment of communication theory to a flat ontology, one setting aside the distinction of subject and object, but also the distinction of human and non-human. Instead of addressing the problem of incommensurable traditions, as Bernstein (1983) did in critiquing the dialectic of objectivism and relativism, and as Russill and Craig (2007) did in elaborating the metamodel, the ventriloquial view forces scholars to address an agential conception of the world. Regardless of Craig’s commitment to a dialogic conception of communication theory, this is the central difference.

Cooren’s effort to simulate a cross-tradition dialogue between pragmatism and the other seven traditions of communication develops in these terms even as it seeks accord with Craig’s ‘principles’ for constituting a field. The results are mixed, in my opinion, even as I find the account of pragmatism compelling. Why mixed? First, there is the ironic consequence of the pragmatist metamodel. Pragmatism, a philosophy best known for its practical orientation, inspires a fiendishly abstract discussion, as a debate over different models of meta-theoretical debate is far removed from the initial abstractions of a first-order theory: theories are organized by a conception of tradition, which are differentiated by a conception of inter-theoretical debate across traditions, as different models of organizing that inter-theoretical debate are debated by Craig and Cooren (2012, 2014). Second, the critiques of Craig’s original proposal will recur. Cooren demonstrates how the different traditions of theory identified by Craig might incorporate an agential view of the world. Yet, if this is a central insight afforded by pragmatism, it is not surprising that Cooren uses it to develop a dialogue between pragmatism and other traditions. My feeling is that those scholars accusing Craig of naively or cynically ‘stacking the deck’ in favour of pragmatism will say the same thing to Cooren, as a pragmatist orientation has led Cooren to organize communication theory in terms of a pragmatic metamodel. It is a lazy argument, to be sure, but one flung at Craig with some frequency. Third, it isn’t yet clear why figuring the world in agential terms is especially pressing for communication scholars, especially given that their authority and relevance tends to rest on elucidating the more immediate societal implications of communication.

I find none of these concerns especially serious. Still, these are obvious obstacles to a fuller use of the metamodel among communication scholars as Craig and Cooren imagine it.

Planetary pragmatism?

Cooren's pragmatism is characterized by an extraordinarily wide sense of distributed agency. Things, our worlds, perhaps even the planet are agential in Cooren's approach. What motivates him to appropriate pragmatism in this way? Is it simply the desire for a coherent field of communication theory? What is it that requires a theoretical innovation of this sort?

Cooren's pragmatism reflects his engagements with Latour and new materialism but it is the sort of thing we can expect in trying to take seriously the crises disclosed by the earth sciences. The earth sciences are typically discussed in the humanities and social sciences with respect to the term, "anthropocene", which suggests a new geological condition for humanity, as the geophysical composition of the planet loses its character as a stable or slowly shifting background for human affairs. Ecologies, of course, are delicate webs of life prone to dynamic transitions, yet these geophysical concerns are something different, as the possibility of ecological inhabitation requires planetary scale dynamics that have been disrupted and rendered problematic in ways not previously registered.

Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour, in the two most sustained efforts to develop the consequences of this understanding of the earth sciences, address this problem by expanding our usual conceptions of agency to encompass it. Latour asks us to conceive the earth in terms of agency and to refigure humanity as the "earthbound", whereas Chakrabarty asks how the earth sciences accord "geological agency" to humans. As Chakrabarty (2009) states, humans "become geological agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself" (206–207). The planet, in short, registers our collective agency as a species in geological terms, which forces us to rethink species as both biological (living) and planetary (geophysical) achievements.

Cooren's provocation to communication theory might better attune us to this situation and it is why I am fascinated by his interest in Peirce. I am not at all certain that our vitalist and biologically organized conceptions of matter are sufficient to register the significance of our situation. Dewey, in particular, is valuable for attuning us to how humans shape their collective situations in a continuously tangled and dynamic ecology, yet it isn't clear whether his account can characterize how we are situated by the broader planetary parameters within which all life on earth has evolved, Bertrand Russell's snarky comments notwithstanding. We might expect to muddle through, of course, yet I believe Chakrabarty is right, and that the planetary creates rather more difficult and severe rifts in our thinking than we anticipate. As Chakrabarty points out, it is precisely not a matter of conceiving our reliance on the planet in ecological terms or of scaling up an embodied or ecological agency to the global scale, but of attuning to the situation disclosed by a planetary science that is indifferent to the uniqueness of the earth. Peirce, the pragmatist whose day job was planetary measurement, might push us past subjective (James), biological (Dewey), and socially (Mead) inflected pragmatism in interesting ways.

Agency is not a quality of embodied humans, for Cooren, but of communicative relations developed between humans, things, and the situations they inhabit. The methodological

question involves how to register the world animating the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Cooren's agential conception of the world, as I have called it, examines communication in excess of the intentions and interests of actants, and I'm fascinated by how it might develop more systematically in light of the problem posed by Chakrabarty.

Of course, if there is not yet a conception of agency that has incorporated how our situatedness in bodies and environments is dependent on planetary systems, I doubt communication scholars will find this especially troubling, as earthly processes are still understood as too broad and too slowly changing to have noticeable or significant effects on human culture. We retain that assumption at significant peril. If Cooren's work can help us access the planetary in this respect, the ventriloquial account of communication needs a wider hearing, even if the hoped for field of communication theory fails to materialize.

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