FILOZOFIA
Volume 80, Number 5, 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2025.80.5.4

Jürgen Habermas's Communicative Democracy: Between Peirce and Dewey

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RAŠKA, Š.: Jürgen Habermas's Communicative Democracy: Between Peirce and Dewey
FILOZOFIA, 80, 2025, No 5, pp. 650 – 664

In this article, I develop an interpretation of Jürgen Habermas's theory of democracy, with particular attention to his later work, highlighting pragmatic inspirations and affinities. Following a brief outline of Peirce's communicative conception of scientific inquiry, I analyze Habermas's theory in relation to the concept of communication, including his contextually significant critique of Hannah Arendt. Three functions of communication within Habermas's framework form the core of my approach, situating him in close proximity to the pragmatic philosophical tradition. In conclusion, I draw on Axel Honneth's reading of John Dewey's theory of democracy to underscore Habermas's relevance for contemporary discussions on pragmatism and democracy.

Keywords: democracy – communication – general will – Peirce – Habermas – Dewey

Introduction

Habermas's political thinking in general has attracted considerable attention in the last decades, positioning him as one of the most influential figures in contemporary democratic theory and, more broadly, in post-war political philosophy (e.g., Rosenfeld – Arato 1998; Goode 2005; Chambers – Kymlicka 2002).

Especially in his latest writings, Habermas contextualizes his political thinking as a theory of democracy, with noticing, that nowadays, without democratic theory, a critique of capitalism is unimaginable (Habermas 2022, 86 – 87). The original emphasis on the public sphere and law have been

concretized and partly re-interpreted in the notion of deliberative processes that – accentuating communication and the formation of general will – constitute the essence of democratic politics (Habermas 2022, 89 – 90). In this context, Habermas is most commonly, categorized either as a representative of critical theory or, in the field of democratic theory, as a proceduralist or a defender of so-called deliberative democracy (Bohman – Regh 1997; Saffon – Urbinati 2013).

However, in what follows, I will interpret Habermas's later work with a particular emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of his theory. This pragmatic focus, I believe, allows for a more accurate interpretation of his contemporary efforts than the endless references to its Kantian roots, or situating his positions solely within debates between proceduralism and republicanism, the history of critical philosophy or post-war Germany.

Accordingly, this paper revolves around what is sometimes referred to as the communicative notion of power (e.g., Frega 2015; Günther 1998), which appears to offer a suitable paradigm for mediating between the pragmatic thought and Habermas's theory. I therefore begin with a brief outline of Peirce's concept of communicative rationality. For the same reason, I also highlight the significance of Hannah Arendt's theory – crucial to this paradigm and to Habermas as well, albeit primarily in a negative sense, as it provides a contrasting framework that enhances our understanding of the pragmatic dimensions of Habermas's reflections. Next, I turn to Habermas's concept of public communication, elaborating on its central role and function within his theory of democracy. In the final section, I use the notion of communication, together with Habermas's emphasis on deliberative processes as a means of forming the general will, to position him closer to Dewey – perhaps even closer than he himself would admit.

I. Peirce and Communication

Peirce's fallibilistic theory of inquiry revolves around the notions of inter-subjectivity and agreement (Hookway 2002; Misak 2004). This intersubjective focus emerges early in Peirce's reflections on the fixation of belief, which can be understood as the starting point of his semantical pragmatism. In this context, Peirce introduces the terms "social impulse" and "social feeling" to describe the fundamental reality of an individual's interpersonal situatedness within the lifeworld. This inherently involves communicative interaction with others and has explicit epistemological significance. These impulses or feelings bear the potential to challenge the naïve standpoint of the "self" holding beliefs without

reference to or acknowledgment of the experiences of others (Peirce 1992, 116 – 117; 150).

Thus, Peirce discusses communicative interactions first at the level of everyday, ordinary experiences. However, even at this level, communication has a crucial meaning in Peirce's epistemology. We are all familiar with the common experience of recognizing, through communication, that our fundamental beliefs are often no better (or worse) than those of others. Similarly, we may notice differences between our views and those of distant times or foreign societies – differences that can stimulate changes in our own perspectives. This fundamental fact implies that belief cannot be a purely individual matter. Its nature is communicative and shared.

Peirce's insights into everyday communication are further developed in his broader notion of the epistemological primacy of communication in his description of the scientific method. For Peirce, the scientific method – unlike the methods of tenacity, authority, and a priori – is the only one explicitly open to social impulses. These impulses operate within the logic of the scientific method, constituting its very essence (Peirce 1992, see esp. 120 – 122). Much like the process of fixing beliefs in everyday conversations, the scientific community functions through interaction and communication.

However, this may sound somewhat obvious and overly general. From Peirce's texts, I believe we can abstract two concrete forms of this interaction. The first can be described as cooperation among scientists, involving the constant exposure of one's perspectives to those of others – a process closely tied to ordinary social impulses. The key point is that this exchange is conducted methodologically, within the practice of science conceptualized as a linguistic and semiotic community. Science, therefore, is understood as a community defined by the sum of semantic, inferential, and even ethical rules that guide the practice of inquiry – or at least should guide it. These rules are not fixed or given; rather, they are created, grounded, and revisited within the practice of scientific inquiry itself. In this sense, their validity and normativity are rooted in the intersubjective practice of reasoning.

Moreover, Peirce's understanding of reasoning is not only an ongoing process but also inherently historical. Thus, the actual community must remain in dialogue with its own history. This brings us to the second fundamental form of interaction: the inferential linking of partial claims and conclusions that transcend individual scientists and extend across generations (Peirce 1992, 126 – 127, 138).

However, in the end, it is not the past but the future that plays a key role in Peircean scientific proceduralism. Peirce notably refers to the idea of an ideal community and its rules, which serve as a regulative assumption guiding ideal scientific conduct (Peirce 1992, 48). It is precisely by following these rules that concrete scientists are guaranteed the possibility of convergence among their contemporary – and necessarily fallibilistic – perspectives. Logically, we may suppose that this final conclusion – serving as a regulative point of reference throughout Peirce's epistemology – coincides with a definitive agreement, that is, with the end of communicative practices or their proper realization – consensus.

Anyway, for Peirce, human interaction is fundamentally communicative. Communication should be understood as a tool for resolving opinions effectively within a community, particularly a scientific community. This includes establishing beliefs, testing hypotheses, setting communal goals, and evaluating the means to achieve them. All of this exemplifies Peirce's theory of science, in which communication is conceived primarily in regulative-procedural terms, defined at a semantical-epistemological level.

II. Communicative Paradigm: Excurse to Arendt

After this brief introduction, let us move to the realm of politics. To conceptualize communication as a central point of politics is, nothing entirely new, nor is it something unique to Habermas. Particularly Hannah Arendt developed a concept of political freedom in which the communication plays an important role.

According to Arendt, communication could be understood as a core aspect of modern politics, even if indirectly through the conception of freedom. In particular, through examples of 18th century revolutions Arendt makes clear how this should be understood. Because there is a kind of restauration of ancient Greek concept of publics during the revolutionary events, it can be argued, that this is where the relevance of using one's own reason in the specifically conceived public sphere is returning to the concourse.

Arendt herself do not use the term "reason" or "public reason" but connect mainly the American revolution, with the realization of freedom manifested through the specific form of discursivity:

> Whatever the merits of the opening claim of the American Revolution - no taxation without representation – it certainly could not appeal by virtue of its charms. It was altogether different with the speech-making and decision-taking, the oratory and the business, the thinking and the persuading, and

> the actual doing which proved necessary to drive this claim to its logical conclusion: independent government and the foundation of a new body politic (Arendt 1990, 34).

Therefore, Arendt believes that 18th century revolutions created an old-new public space, which facilitates – or even enables – proper mutual communication on common issues.

As is well known, Arendt's notion of communication is a part of her broader republican vision of politics. This means that mutual communication among equals, especially or exclusively concerning matters that transcend the realm of "mere life," plays a key role in gaining of genuine human identity. For it is not only communication that manifests itself in revolutionary processes, but also the old ancient Greek linkage between freedom and equality. Before putting these two things together Arendt explains:

> The reason for this insistence on the interconnection of freedom and equality in Greek political thought was that freedom was understood as being manifest in certain, by no means all, human activities, and that these activities could appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them. The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together …the political space, proper (Arendt 1990, 31).

In this and other similar claims communication needs to be dimensioned as manifestation of freedom as only possible thanks to the public sphere. This could be link directly to the general notion of inter-subjective dimension of communication, as followed by Peirce. By Arendt, there is an emphasis on gaining a proper identity through the undistorted relationships with others. These includes politically conceived communication. Public space and communication are conceived as distinctly normative means through which we manifest ourselves as human beings, as free.

Nevertheless, this is apparently very remote from Peirce's emphasis on inter-subjectivity as he conceives communication as core of the procedure in inquiry. Of course, this procedure may or may not be appropriate, and that is indeed decided on the basis of a properly realized inter-subjective dimension of it. However, for Peirce, this has nothing to do with the struggle for true human identity.

III. Habermas and Communicative Turn

Now, let us turn explicitly to Habermas, to grasp the concept of communicative power and its pragmatic dimension clearly. Basically, Habermas considers Peirce to be one of the most significant authors in the whole of modern philosophy, precisely because of his paradigmatical change from "the subjectivist to the communicative notion of rationality" (Habermas 2019, 715 – 716).

But Peirce, for Habermas, seems to be only a part, of a broader tendency. This could be illustrated in analogy to the Arendt's historical-genealogical aspect of the significance of communication in politics. Already in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Habermas defines modernity in terms of a new constellation of discourse on normativity that he situates, similarly to Arendt, in the period of the civic revolutions of the late 18th century and the Enlightenment movement in general (Habermas 1984, 15 – 19). In accordance with modernity's quest "to create its normativity out of itself" (Habermas 1984, 16) there is an ever-growing pressure on justification of one's own opinions which, of course, applies primarily to the political sphere of society's life. However, it is crucial to see the fundamental difference between Habermas's and Arendt's concepts of communication in the realm of politics. This difference directs us toward the pragmatic traits of Habermas's notion of communication.

As noted above, Arendt is a republican thinker who considers communication or public discussion to be part of the individual's self-realization. By contrast, Habermas, importantly, sees communication primarily as an expression of needs and interests, socio-economic issues (Habermas 1994, 15 – 17).

A second key reason for the disagreement between Habermas and Arendt is his view of communication as part of a procedural process. Simply put, he considers Arendt's revival of ancient Greek politics anachronistic, incapable of capturing the modern form of politics (Habermas 1994, 7; 14 – 15), particularly given the conditions under which decisions are made. This critical perspective appears notably Peircean.

What is crucial, therefore, is a Habermas' notion of deliberation, understood as a communicatively mediated formation of will, through the institutionalization of which law is created (cf. esp. Habermas 2022, 93 – 94; 99 – 100). When we connect this with the notion of the public sphere, we see very clearly that, for late Habermas, democracy primarily means a system that creates room for the origination and realization of communication – not conceived as everyday chatter about our feelings, but as something more sublime.

Here we touch upon a very important distinction that accompanies Habermas's notion of communication: these everyday conversations, when we

talk on another occasion about inflation or high rents, can actually be quite sublime in the sense that they capture something political. For this reason, Habermas, besides the formal public sphere, also defines an informal public sphere, which includes all of these everyday talks about politics (Habermas 1994, 305 – 310).

Peirce's influence becomes more evident when we concentrate on the formal sphere. Habermas defines this sphere institutionally – including structures such as parliament, courts, and other official bodies (Habermas 2009, 159 – 162). What is institutionalized here, is essentially basic human communication, now structured by specific procedural rules. Similar to Peirce's view of science as fundamentally procedural, this concept reflects a regulated form of discourse.

To illustrate this, we can turn to a passage from Habermas's seminal work on democracy, *Between Facts and Norms*, where he connects the institutionalized or formal and general or informal public spheres through procedural features or conversely its abstention:

> The general public sphere is, on the one hand, more vulnerable to the repressive and exclusionary effects of unequally distributed social power, structural violence, and systematically distorted communication than are the institutionalized public spheres of parliamentary bodies. On the other hand, it has the advantage of a medium of unrestricted communication. Here new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively, discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding can be conducted more widely and expressively (Habermas 1996, 307 – 308).

Here, Habermas discusses informal publics, albeit using slightly different terminology than the formal/informal distinction. We see that he contrasts informal sphere with formal, exemplified by the parliamentary complex, highlighting the role of communication. Importantly, he makes subtle yet significant remarks about the quality or substance of such communication.

Informal communication, meaning communication not conducted according to formal procedures, has one clear advantage: it is, let's say, more immediate and, in this sense, potentially more genuine or authentic. However, its primary disadvantage is its susceptibility to distortion. Procedurally governed communication can also be distorted, of course, but the purpose of this distinction seems to be primarily qualitative, or better, normative.

That means, drawing on Peircean ideas, Habermas re-addresses the problem of communication more in terms of fairness. According to Habermas, the proper procedure of communication involves a continuous effort to

establish and adhere to rules of interaction. The purpose of these procedures is to create conditions under which communication can take place fairly.

IV. The Pragmatic Primacy of Communication: Three Functions of Communication in Habermas's Late Theory

We have seen that, much like in Peirce's framework, these regulative-procedural conditions adopt a normative criterion for evaluating the quality of communication. In line with this, and moving towards Habermas's more recent texts, we can formulate three main interpretative claims that emphasize communication as the core of Habermas's theory of democracy.

(1) Although Habermas does not say this explicitly, deliberation bars potential reconciling the above-mentioned interests' tensions which define informal as well as formal public spheres. We have already glanced on Peirce' idea, that science is in a way conflict, but naturally very specific, conducted without physical violence. We can observe in political history that violence is an integral and unfortunately very essential part of conflicting interests in politics. However, this might also be why we perceive the role of procedural rules more clearly, at least according to Habermas, as they allow us to concretize the aforementioned claims. Specifically, procedures create a space for the mutual confrontation of partial interests under equal conditions, excluding violence and power imbalances. Only then can such procedures facilitate communication better adapted to differing interests. Or better: enable communication as a tool to substitute violence altogether.

Regarding this "relativization" of our own point of view while asking others, another consideration arises (2). Habermas, importantly, uses the term will to capture the essence of deliberative processes, whether formal or informal (Habermas 2022, e.g., 89). Deliberation is understood as a process of will formation, incorporating the specific dialectics between individual and general will. The general will is definitively not a mere sum or aggregation of particular individual wills. Here too, communication serves as the link between these two individual-general, seemingly opposite poles. Even more, communication, reconciles the tension between the general will and individual will.

Despite the idea of general will involves a denial of the individual, it ultimately does not result in violent coercion, by Habermas. This denial is, in fact, clothed in a communicative form – it is communication in essence. The dialectics of wills in deliberation, according to Habermas, is a constant and reciprocal confrontation through the perspective of others. This dialectic is grounded in the reciprocity of possible self-expression, coupled with the

mutual recognition of "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas 1996, 307) and others' right to be understood.

Building on this, we can identify a third key function of communication in Habermas's deliberative democracy (3). While emphasizing the differences between Arendt's and Habermas's, I believe Habermas remains, at least partially, influenced by the Rousseau-Hegelian tradition, which, paradoxically, brings him closer to Arendt than he might himself acknowledge. This tradition views politics more as a space of autonomy enabled through mutual recognition (Honneth 2020). Although Habermas addresses it more explicitly through the concept of communication.

Particularly, again in his later conception of deliberation, Habermas presents a highly original understanding of the relationship between coercion and autonomy accompanying the above-described dialectics of wills. He often discusses autonomy, primarily in the context of the procedural self-legislation of citizens in the process of creating laws. This brings us back to our initial definition of Habermas's later theory of democracy: a communicatively mediated formation of will, institutionalized to create law.

More concretely, this means, every citizen realizes his or her autonomy through a form of coercion embedded in procedural rules, while these are nor created in a way of individual self-legislation nor fixed by others. Or maybe, which could sound paradoxically, both. Again, to put it in accordance with Peirce, who is very remote from the idea of autonomy or recognition, procedural rules are originating in intersubjectivity in general. This articulates the idea of autonomy as a synthesis of individual intentionality and external constraint, wherein individuals both create the laws and simultaneously submit to them, i.e., they recognize others (and each other) by recognizing the law as a product of deliberation. This is the main point of the whole concept of discursively conceived legislation.

It is for this reason that I do not think it is entirely appropriate to read Habermas as a proceduralist even though in some regards, this term catch important traits of Habermas theory. We could say that the proceduralist features retains a distinctly republican character. Behind it we can track the notion of autonomy consisting not in independent will, in independent goal setting and independent decision making, but in a necessary exposure to the others. But, important for us, this exposure, is still articulated as a part of procedural-regulative communicative paradigm.

V. Social Function and Normativity

However, I suggested arguing more for a pragmatic interpretation rather than focusing on situating Habermas within terms common to today's political philosophy discourse. Interestingly, Axel Honneth employs the terms proceduralism and republicanism in his 1998 article on John Dewey, which represents one of the first serious efforts to introduce Dewey into the context of critical philosophy (Honneth 1998). In this article, Honneth argues that Dewey's democratic theory serves as a compelling alternative to political liberalism, particularly because it properly mediates between the two prevailing alternatives: proceduralism and republicanism.

Honneth points out that Dewey incorporates procedural elements, as democratic decisions and their legitimacy, according to Dewey, depend on the rational resolution of problems, with the formation of will understood as a broad experimental process. On the other hand, participatory activities of individuals are conceived as a process of achieving freedom through self-realization in conformity with ethical goals that express the life of the community. This perspective involves the development of individual abilities and talents, thereby contributing to the whole – a notion strongly resonant with republicanism (Honneth 1998, 769 – 770).

The most interesting aspect for our purposes, however, is Honneth's terminological reconceptualization of this mediation that Dewey developed. Using sociological terminology, Honneth describes this as an integration of functional and normative dimensions, which unfolds within a society's life when conducted democratically. Obviously, the functional dimension aligns with the procedural dimension because, as functionalism suggests, individuals, as elements in mutual relationships, fulfill specific functions toward each other and the whole in Dewey's democratic community. This is especially captured in Dewey's use of the term "division of labor," inspired by Durkheim (Honneth 1998, 778 – 780).

As suggested, I think Habermas's late theory of democracy, in spite of its proceduralist accent, has similar potential and is very close to Dewey precisely in this regard (cf. Dotts 2016). However, this interpretation is possible only on the basis of the notion of a communicatively mediated general will.

To put this in Honneth's terminology, even late Habermas still conceives the procedure of deliberation primarily as procedural safeguards. However, we suggested that this has a deeper reason, evident precisely in his later theory, where the procedure is conceived as a tool to mediate tensions of interest originating in a specific socio-economic division of society. In this sense,

political institutions function, according to Habermas, as elements of adjustment and balance for the body as a whole. It is not only the law, which is created in deliberative processes – or rather, it is – but the law has its content rooted in its genuine basis: human mutual being and their interdependence, especially regarding basic needs.

This dependency manifests itself, as we have seen, through communication, even in the form of tension or conflict of perspectives. This does not prevent Habermas from speaking about a general will supplying a normative element in his considerations. A general will does not mean that tensions are resolved or that the interests of all are the same. Communicative autonomy primarily means participation and recognition of others on the level of law being simultaneously created and followed, as well as in concrete deliberation among human beings, who are recognized as having the same right to express themselves.

More generally, what I think Honneth rightly suggests in writing about Dewey is that he is very valuable for today's discourse in political philosophy because of his broad and integrative notion of democracy. On the one hand, Dewey insists on the procedural and interest-based core of politics, which remains immune to naïve conceptions of radical changes or the restructuring of our everyday and democratic-institutional life. On the other hand, he combines this with the notion of political freedom as old as Western political thought itself. Habermas, I believe, is able to maintain a very similar tension as we have seen and this, besides the Peircian traits, enables us to call his late theory of democracy pragmatic in a sense.

VI. Conclusions: Habermas's Kantian Pragmatism?

As is evident, we can formulate this claim about the pragmatic nature of Habermas's theory only by emphasizing the communicative essence of his later theory. Habermas's recent connection between deliberation and the communicative concept of will has allowed us to draw a direct line between Peirce, Dewey, and Habermas – thus situating Habermas more concretely within the pragmatic tradition.

In this regard, Richard Bernstein serves as a particularly relevant point of reference, as he engaged in a lifelong dialogue with Habermas, frequently critiquing his "Kantian pragmatism." Bernstein, in fact, insists quite strongly on the Kantian essence of Habermas's philosophy, and it is from this perspective that his critique emerges (Bernstein 2015). Similarly, Cheryl Misak argues that Habermas still leans more toward the Kantian than the pragmatic tradition. Both authors support their thesis primarily by pointing to

Habermas's epistemological realism, which is followed by the so-called transcendental argument, as well as his entire concept of discursive ethics, emphasizing its central role in his political theory (Misak 1994).

However, as I have mentioned, Habermas's later theory emphasizes communicative practices or deliberation almost without referring back to his 1980s project of transcendental-discursive ethics. I believe this shift has its basis in something that I was implicitly trying to consider above, and this could be understood as a careful move towards, figuratively speaking, Peircean and Deweyan pragmatism rather than Kantian by late Habermas. Preserving the Kantian elements in Peirce while simultaneously embracing its pragmatic – i.e., fallibilistic and historical – core.

Accordingly, against Bernstein's and Misak's readings, we should propose three key corrections grounded in Habermas's later theory. Firstly, it must be emphasized that all idealized forms of discourse are necessarily connected to the always "actual" practices of discourse, which should be understood as historical and contingent. Deliberative democracy is sustained by historical and contingent discursive practices.

Secondly, however, it is only in this way that it becomes possible to recur to the procedural-regulative grounding of the concept of democracy, which then serves as a normative framework for assessing every historical and particular form of communication.

The central problem of Habermas's theory of democracy is precisely this procedural-regulative concept of communication and its content, rather than the ontological status of norms. These norms are not decisive for the defense of democracy; the regulative function is sufficient. This is the core thesis of this article: the transcendental argument does not play a decisive role in Habermas's later thought, or at least not the same role as it did in his earlier ethical framework. I believe the entire opposition between the pragmatic and the Kantian is overstated. Peirce himself, by the way, is strong evidence of this.

Habermas's Kantian-pragmatic roots should thus be assessed more in the context of his regulative concept, which incorporates a dimension of the philosophy of history – this time drawing more from pragmatic meliorism in general. The more pressing question for Habermas's theory of democracy is therefore whether the concept must be followed by a philosophy of history and which one, rather than debating whether it is more transcendental or pragmatic. Not only does Peirce's theory of science need to be followed by a melioristic concept of hope, as Misak rightly stresses (Misak 1994, 764), but so does Habermas's theory of democracy.

Thirdly, my systematic effort in this text culminated in bringing Habermas closer to Dewey. This point should also be emphasized when justifying the thesis about pragmatic elements in Habermas's later theory. In response to one of Bernstein's critical texts, Habermas writes: "However, this mode of lawmaking, which is supposed to secure the equal autonomy of all, has a strong normative content" (Habermas 1998, 386).

I believe this formulation is very close to Dewey's legacy in the context of democratic theory that remains relevant today. The idea of communicative autonomy should also be taken more seriously than it has typically been in the contemporary reception of Habermas. This, again, can be understood as an alternative path – one that might be more fruitful than focusing solely on Kantian elements or treating them as the very core of Habermas's thought. This does not mean that Kant is not relevant for Habermas. However, Kant is increasingly being rearticulated and integrated alongside – or even through – pragmatic thinkers.

My aim was to suggest that emphasizing different aspects of Habermas's later work can open up new insights and even new pathways in our thinking about democracy, pragmatism, and Habermas's philosophy more broadly. For example, this shift allows us to explore new directions for pragmatic investigations into the "communicative turn" in its contemporary forms – such as social media and AI-driven communication. This leads to questions concerning the potential dangers of social media and AI tools regarding the substance and quality of communicative practices that are stimulated or conducted by and through these technologies. This has been partly explored by Habermas himself (Habermas 2022a) and others (Coeckelbergh 2024; Englund 2015).

It is not my aim here to develop this analysis further. In accordance with our conclusions, we can simply point out that pragmatism – both in Peirce and Dewey – connects the communicative aspects with meliorism (Koopman 2006). This brings us back to the reconciliatory function of communication conducted under procedurally defined rules, i.e., to the potential of a Habermasian synthesis between procedural and republican traits in a Peircean-Deweyan manner.

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This work has been supported by Charles University Research Centre program no. UNCE/24/SSH/026.

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