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MISSION POSSIBLE: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE QUEST FOR FINDING SHARED MEANING

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Abstract: The source of objective meaning is a controversial topic. For most of human history, religion had a monopoly on meaning, truth, and values. But from the nineteenth century onwards and with relativism gaining more popularity, this began to change, leaving most people divided into two main camps: those who believe in the existence of objective meaning and truth and those who maintain that such concepts simply do not exist. The resulting impossibility of finding shared meaning is very problematic, especially when it comes to intercultural communication. In fact, to speak of communication is to speak of common meaning. In this paper, I attempt to provide a definition for intercultural communication, explore the issue of shared meaning, and propose a culture-free approach to the latter—one that is based on reverting to an axiomatic understanding of the notion of meaning. My aim is to conclude that the failure of both dogmatism and relativism to sustain intercultural communication should not be interpreted pessimistically. Quite the opposite, it should be viewed as an opportunity to investigate other promising alternatives, mainly Sam Harris’s science of morality.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, shared meaning, universality, religion, relativism

Human civilization, with all its awe-inspiring majesty, is the product of the successful transmission of meaning and knowledge across chronological and cultural lines. Hence, Ancient Greek philosophy and science were instrumental for the development of Arab natural philosophy and math during the Islamic Golden Age. The Arabs, in their turn, had an undeniable influence on the great thinkers of the European Renaissance who ushered in an age of rapid scientific development. Today, with the unprecedented advancement of communication means, one can witness almost in real-time how modern scientific innovations migrate across geographical spheres. All of this, however, is preconditioned upon successful communication, a process that is made possible only through the existence of objective meaning. The source of the latter remains a much-debated issue—and rightly so. This is because when speaking of communication, one must speak of shared meaning. Otherwise, any attempt at exchanging ideas is reduced to white noise.

In this paper, I attempt to provide a definition for intercultural communication, explore the issue of shared meaning, and propose a culture-free approach to the latter—one that is based on reverting to an axiomatic understanding of the notion of meaning. My aim is to conclude that the failure of both dogmatism and relativism to sustain intercultural communication should not be interpreted pessimistically. Quite the opposite, it should be viewed as an opportunity to investigate other promising alternatives, mainly Sam Harris’s science of morality.

Communication, just like many other notions of vital importance to humans, is a “term [that] is not easy to define” (Littlejohn and Foss 4). Despite considerable academic efforts, concocting a uniform or a preferable definition is still both unattainable and possibly impractical (Littlejohn and Foss 4). Frank Dance, as Littlejohn and Foss further expound, singles out three “critical conceptual differentiation[s]” in proposed definitions (4). These are: “abstractness” or “level of observation,” “intentionality,” and “normative judgment” (Littlejohn and Foss 4).

In terms of “abstractness,” definitions fluctuate across the spectrum from too general to too specific (Littlejohn and Foss 4). As for “intentionality,” various “definitions include only purposeful message sending and receiving; others do not impose this limitation” (Littlejohn and Foss 4). When it comes to “normative judgment,”

there are definitions that contain “a statement of success, effectiveness, or accuracy,” while others are void of these statements (Littlejohn and Foss 4).

Despite such variations, most definitions of communication tend to emphasize two vital elements: transmission of information and establishment of meaning. For example, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines communication as “information communicated” or “information transmitted or *conveyed*” (emphasis is mine). Here, the verb “convey”, which means to “impart or communicate by statement, suggestion, gesture, or appearance” (*Merriam-Webster*), seems to denote expressing something meaningful that can be understood.

Furthermore, according to Guffey and Loewy, the authors of *Essentials of Business Communication*, the process of communication is “the transmission of information and *meaning* from one individual or group to another” (7, emphasis is mine). Meaning, for the two authors, is the “crucial element in this definition,” and, therefore, the main goal of communication is the “transmission of [it]” (Guffey and Loewy 7). Guffey and Loewy stipulate that *only* when information is comprehended by the receiver exactly as meant by the sender, can the communication process be considered effective (7).

So, if communication, at least in the context of this study, is the process of exchanging meaningful information to establish a common understanding, intercultural communication is then simply the same process taking place across cultures. Martin et al. define intercultural communication as a process that “involves . . . at least two expressive systems in interaction that are placed in cross-cultural perspective” (Martin et al. 26).

In an intercultural setting, effectiveness, shared meaning, and information exchange all share an organic relationship. As Ting-Toomey explains, “the criterion of ‘effectiveness’ refers to the degree to which communicators achieve mutually shared meaning and integrative goal-related outcomes through skillful interactional strategies in the various intercultural negotiation phases” (287).

Unfortunately, meaning can be an elusive concept that is hard to pin down. Notable philosopher Paul Horwich writes that “the word ‘meaning’ is deployed ambiguously, both in ordinary language and by theoreticians” (3). The difficulty to define meaning is further exacerbated by the complexity of the way it is formulated in a

specific culture and the fact that it is subject to linguistic, social, historical, and even cognitive influences.

The interest of the present study is meaning in its most basic form— that is to say, meaning as a “significant quality” or “something meant or intended” (*Merriam-Webster*). A legitimate, valid criticism of such a premise would be its oversimplicity. Nevertheless, oversimplifying or accepting a “just because” understanding of fundamental concepts is unavoidable. Colors are a great example.

How does one define red or yellow? Does a culture-specific interpretation of a certain color bear any significance on its actual (not to say objective) meaning? Such questions are almost impossible to answer, and even if they are, the answer is not only useless but also has no bearing on the objective nature of colors as “visual perception[s]” or “[phenomena] of light,” as the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines them. In other words, blue is the same “phenomenon of light” in Europe as it is in Africa or Asia. Once approached as such, blue seems to acquire a simple yet universal understanding.

The same line of thinking can be extended to more complex phenomena. Marriage, its forms, and the perception of it all vary greatly across cultures. Gay marriage, which is legal in many Western countries, is not only illegal but also inconceivable in many Muslim countries. The modern idea that marriage is a personal choice and an expression of love and commitment would have arguably been unimaginable in the darker days of the West. Nevertheless, almost in all cultures and in all eras, marriage has been understood, at its most fundamental level, as a union and a “consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law” (*Merriam-Webster*). Regardless of what culture has to say, the basic shared meaning of marriage is that it is a consensual social contract sanctioned by the larger community. This could be a good starting point to cross-culturally discuss relevant issues (e.g. the right of same-sex couples to get married).

Establishing shared meaning hinges upon the existence of certain universal criteria or points of reference to define concepts and crystalize ideas. This is easier said than done, however, for the source of meaning has been a controversial topic for most of human history.

Traditionally, people looked to religion and scriptures to derive a sense of meaning. Characterized as a “set of beliefs, symbols, and practices . . . based on the idea

of the sacred” (Scott and Marshall 643), religion remains one of the most fascinating aspects of humans and a major driving force behind our actions. In fact, it was Carl Jung, the prolific psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who remarked that our psyche is “by nature religious” (qtd. in Dunne 16).

Religion, as Scott and Marshall point out, “involves the creation of *meaning*, which becomes *objective* in culture, and thereby transcends immediate experience” (374, emphasis is mine). Christian philosophers usually establish a symbiotic relationship between religion (or the existence of God), objective morality, and objective meaning. Their argument is that God is the source of objective moral standards through which objective meaning is conceptualized. Notable philosopher William Lane Craig eloquently explains this, as he writes:

If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. When I speak of objective moral values, I mean moral values that are valid and binding whether anybody believes in them or not . . . Friedrich Nietzsche, the great nineteenth century atheist who proclaimed the death of God, understood that the death of God meant the destruction of all meaning and value in life. I think that Friedrich Nietzsche was right. (17-18)

This argument would only make sense *if* there is such a thing as a universal understanding of God. But this is clearly not the case. The existence of a myriad of different sects and hermeneutic traditions within the *same* religion, as well as the impossibility of reconciling the basic premises of the major world religions, represents enough evidence that there is no uniform conception of the divine and that religion cannot constitute a source of shared meaning within the same culture, let alone across cultures. For instance, though in theory both claim to have similar basic beliefs, the two major sects of Islam (Shia and Sunni) still do not even agree on some major doctrinal issues, a disagreement that has resulted in centuries of religious violence and mutual repression.

The same goes for some Christian sects that have different views on God, the nature of Jesus Christ, salvation, etc. The large number of different denominations testifies to the subjective nature of the religious or spiritual experience. As evident in 1

Corinthians 3:3-7, “even in early New Testament times,” Ron Rhodes writes, “the church experienced some sectarianism” (13).¹

So, if one starts by admitting that God exists and that He is the source of moral objective values and absolute truths, the question regarding whose conception of God one should follow remains impossible to answer. Universal meaning, thus, simply cannot be derived from religion. Any objectivity religion has to offer is illusory at best. As Sam Harris “hope[s] to persuade” us, the idea that “religion is the best authority on meaning, values, morality, and the good life . . . is not only untrue, it could not possibly be true” (17).

Moreover, Lane-Craig’s argument about God and objective moral values can be made by the adherents of any other religion— not necessarily Christianity. Muslims, Hindus, Bahais, Jews, and virtually the members of any religious denomination can make the claim that their God is the source of shared meaning and objective morality. As Harris remarks, “mutually incompatible religious traditions now take refuge behind the same non sequitur,” which is that “faith in [God] is the only reliable source of meaning and moral guidance” (18).

Regarding shared meaning, when each religion argues that its respective view of God is the *only* correct source of objective morality and universal meaning, the very claim to objectivity becomes self-contradictory: a display of extreme subjectivity dressed up as objectivity. Any meaning one may derive from religion, hence, remains personal, a matter that makes effective intercultural communication harder to attain.

In his 1999 book, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Roy A. Rappaport sheds light on the nature of the religious experience:

The understandings given by religious experience are said by those who have experienced them to be of an order of meaningfulness exceeding all others. The nature of this meaningfulness is *mysterious*, but we can at least approach it. The surpassing meaningfulness of religious experience is usually associated with Ultimate Sacred

¹ It is worth noting that Rhodes immediately afterwards clarifies that “formal denominations are actually a relatively recent development” (13).

Postulates.^[2] It emanates from them, or they point to it, or it is hidden in their depths.
(391, emphasis is mine)

Since religion facilitates an understanding that is deeply subjective and born out of individual experience, it appears almost impossible for religion to form an objective structure against which concepts and ideas can be defined.

Contrarily, one may still contend that some sort of objective meaning is derivable from religious rituals (e.g. Eastern Orthodox Communion, Catholic Mass, Islamic Prayers, etc.), especially since they are mostly uniform in nature and practiced in the same manner across cultures. However, despite the objective façade (especially when practiced collectively), rituals are still akin to feelings, as they are individual experiences masquerading as pseudo signifiers of collective meaning or experience.

From an anthropological point of view, a ritual is a group of “formal actions in a set pattern that, through symbol, express[es] a *shared meaning*” (Bruce and Yearley 263, emphasis is mine). Citing the Catholic Mass as an example, Bruce and Yearley further explain that from a sociological point of view, the term denotes “any regularly repeated pattern of action, with the implication that the doing of it conveys more than the content of what is done” (263).

Nevertheless, any sense of shared meaning coming from religious rituals is ultimately false when scrutinized. First, while such patterns may carry a certain meaning for one onlooker, they may carry a totally different meaning for another. Second, it is almost impossible to tell what a ritual represents for each participant. Third, religion is a culture-specific phenomenon, and, logically, its rituals must be judged as such.

More importantly, religious mythologies allege that their authority comes from a superior, detached voice that resides outside the physical realm and communicates meaningful orders and commandments. Sam Harris writes that “religious conservatives” are adamant that “values must come from a voice in a whirlwind” (16).

² Rappaport characterizes the “ultimate sacred postulates” as the dominant forms in a “five-tiered hierarchy of understandings, the pattern of which is to be found in all religious rituals” (Gluck 171). They are “unquestionab[ly]” revered and semantically “unfalsifiable” and void of “material referents” (Gluck 171).

According to Islamic tradition, on the Miraj Night, Mohammed traveled to heaven and met God who told him that his followers should perform the five Muslim prayers daily. In the Judeo-Christian narrative, Moses went up Mount Sinai where he received The Ten Commandments. In both traditions, religion lays claim to an out-of-this-world origin to justify its objectivity.

However, religion is still a verifiably biologically-influenced phenomenon. Harris explains how the human D4 dopamine receptor impacts one's religious views and experiences:

Dopamine receptor genes may play a role in religious belief as well. People who have inherited the most active form of the D4 receptor are more likely to believe in miracles and to be skeptical of science; the least active forms correlate with 'rational materialism.'⁵⁰ Skeptics given the drug L-dopa, which increases dopamine levels, show an increased propensity to accept mystical explanations for novel phenomena. (167)

It is true that to show how religion is influenced by or how it originates in human biology does *not* make a good argument against its basic premises and merely amounts to committing a fallacy of origin. Nonetheless, by demystifying religion, one can at least make a good case against its supernatural genesis, which is usually used to justify its claim of objectivity: this is not me (subjectively) saying this; this is what God (objectively) says.

If religion and rituals fail to provide an objective basis for shared meaning to conduct successful intercultural communication, relativism is still not a better option. Relativism, as defined by Pojman, is "the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths" (790). Pojman further informs us that the notion has "two types, *cognitive* and *ethical*" (790). The former type postulates that "the world has no intrinsic characteristics" and that it can be understood in various manners, as "there are no universal truths about" it (Pojman 790). Pojman points out that Protagoras, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, was the first to crystalize this concept (790). The latter's most signature statement is that "man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not" (qtd. in Pojman 790). Cognitive

relativism is often criticized as a “self-referentially incoherent” ideology that “presents its statements as universally true, rather than simply relatively so” (Pojman 790).

Ethical relativism, on the other hand, is more concerned with morality rather than with the external world. It claims that universal moral values do not exist and that morality is culture-specific and subjective (Pojman 790). Hence, such a view “allows for a plurality of moral facts and truths” (Brink 283). Ethical relativism is divided into two subcategories: conventionalism and subjectivism (Pojman 790). While the former “holds that moral principles are valid relative to the conventions of a given culture or society,” the latter “maintains that individual choices are what determine the validity of a moral principle” (Pojman 790).

Hemingway brilliantly captures the essence of ethical subjectivism in his nonfiction book *Death in the Afternoon*. He writes:

So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine. (13)

Pojman also alludes to Hemingway’s quote and describes the slogan of this philosophy as “morality lies in the eyes of the beholder” (790).

Hemingway’s views on morality are neither logical nor useful. And more particularly, such subjectivity makes it impossible to have even a semblance of shared or objective meaning. As depicted above, the barbaric practice of bullfighting ceases to be a blood sport. Instead, it becomes a mysterious, almost-spiritual experience that lacks a specific meaning, something that makes a person “feel very sad but very fine.”

What seems to be understandable and logical to Hemingway is illogical and beyond the comprehension of a certain reader. That is why Hemingway makes it clear that he “do[es] not defend” the morality of bullfighting. This is a useful illustration of how such subjective relativism makes it difficult (if not impossible) to construct a shared meaning that would facilitate the communication process.

One must note here that morality and shared meaning have an indissociable link. This is not because of the claim that meaning comes from the objective moral codes dictated by a deity but because morality, at its core, is a set of shared meanings relating to moral principles and practices. One of *Merriam-Webster's* definitions of morality is that it is a “doctrine or system of moral conduct.” For a system to work, a high degree of common understanding is necessary.

Moreover, its innate universality and essential reliance on sharedness make morality, by default, cross-cultural. In the introductory chapter of his book *The Ethics of Memory*, Avishai Margalit writes that a “distinction between ethics and morality” stems from the “distinction between two types of human relations: thick ones and thin ones” (7). “Thick relations” are what one shares with those close to them, such as “parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman,” while “thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attribute of being human” or “some aspects of being human, such as being a woman or being sick” (7).

On the relationship between “thin” and “thick” relations, on the one hand, and morality and ethics, on the other, Margalit writes:

Ethics, in the way I use the term, tells us how we should regulate our thick relations; morality tells us how we should regulate our thin relations . . . Because it encompasses all humanity, morality is long on geography and short on memory. Ethics is typically short on geography and long on memory. (8)

To be “long on geography,” morality needs to be communicated cross culturally, which is a process that begs for sharedness and commonness of meaning— at least to a satisfying degree.

The uniqueness of Harris’s view on morality (and therefore meaning) is revealed from the very onset of *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*—its very title. Coming from someone who is both a philosopher and neuroscientist, the book proposes an alternative approach to morality, one that is based on science and scientific understanding as opposed to both religion-based objective morality and moral relativism.

For him, religion has no place in the conversation about “meaning, values, morality, and the good life” (17). It is rather science and rational inquiry that can help us define and understand them. Thus, he writes that “questions about” such concepts are “really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures” (11-12). “Values” thus become “facts” that we can approach through the scientific method (12). “The most important of these facts,” Harris explains, “are bound to transcend culture—just as facts about physical and mental health do” (11-12).

Harris’s aim is to make the case that any discussion about values is essentially one about “an interdependent world of facts” (14). Notions of utmost importance to morality, such as “good” and “evil,” ought not to be understood from a religious perspective, Harris explains (15). “Just as there is no such thing as Christian physics or Muslim algebra, . . . there is no such thing as Christian or Muslim morality” (Harris 15). Therefore, we must see morality as a “branch of science” that is still in its infancy (Harris 15).

Regarding moral relativism, what frustrates Harris is the readiness of “secular liberals” to accept the hypothesis that “objective answers to moral questions” can’t be found (16). Secularists’ most significant failure, in the eyes of Harris, is born out of “separating facts and values” (16). For example, secularists are seemingly unable to find an objective explanation as to why John Stuart Mill’s views on “right and wrong” are “closer to the Truth” than those of Osama bin Laden (16), which justifiably strikes Harris as frustrating.

Besides, Harris is critical of the popular false dichotomy of “nonoverlapping magisteria” proposed by Stephen J. Gould. For Gould, as put by Harris, “science and religion, properly construed, cannot be in conflict because they constitute different domains of expertise” (17). This “doomed notion” stipulates that while science explains how the world works, religion remains our most viable option for understanding “meaning, values, morality, and the good life” (17). Harris, alternatively, sets his approach to such important issues in opposition to this common misconception. In his own words:

I hope to persuade you that this is not only untrue, it could not possibly be true. Meaning, values, morality, and the good life must relate to facts about the well-being of

conscious creatures—and, in our case, must lawfully depend upon events in the world and upon states of the human brain. Rational, open-ended, honest inquiry has always been the true source of insight into such processes. Faith, if it is ever right about anything, is right by accident. (17)

The strong relatedness between the “well-being of conscious creatures” and morality is exemplified in Harris’s “moral landscape.” As he explains, the latter is an imaginary realm of “real and potential outcomes” where the highest summits embody the utmost amount of “well-being” achievable and its “valleys” and low points epitomize the worst kind of misery (18-19). Ideas, behaviors, cultural values, and other socially-constructed practices are comparable to “movements across this landscape” and can hence result in various “degrees of human flourishing” (Harris 19). To examine these “movements,” one may rely on different disciplines, “ranging from biochemistry to economics” (Harris 19). This imagined space “will increasingly be illuminated by science” (Harris 25).

Harris remains sober to the impossibility of finding a satisfying solution to every moral problem or singling out the “best way . . . to live” (19). He, instead, envisages this “moral landscape” as a place of plurality and “multiple peaks” that may all equally merit proper investigation (19). Harris’s premise is that “multiple answers to moral questions need not pose a problem for us” (19). He then cites the way food is viewed as an example: although there is no “*one* right food,” the distinction between “healthy food and poison” remains objectively valid (19).

Harris further argues that any division between “values” and “facts” is “illusory” for three main reasons (23). First, he regards “maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures” as the “only thing we can reasonably value,” and, therefore, our potential knowledge of it is bound to turn into knowledge about brains and how they relate to the outside world (23). Second, values are innately embedded in objective knowledge; the latter’s cornerstone is “honest observation and reasoning” (23-24). Consequently, we cannot engage with facts without a priori valuing certain concepts, such as logic, evidence, and reason. (Harris 24). Third, “beliefs about facts and beliefs about values seem to arise from similar processes at the level of the brain” (Harris 24).

What is “good,” for Harris, is definable as simply “that which supports well-being” (25). Nonetheless, Harris is fully aware of the problem of definition. He admits

that the notion of “well-being,” though of vital importance, is still hard to pin down (24). Additionally, he likens “well-being” to “physical health” and sees them both as possessing meanings that are “perpetually open to revision as we make progress in science” (24).

In our modern times, to be in good “physical health” means that a person has no “detectable disease,” can work out, and is expected to reach his eighties in relatively good health (Harris 24). This definition, however, is subject to change as scientific progress continues (Harris 24). It should be noted here that any changes that may occur on how we understand “human health” (no matter how major they are) do not necessarily mean that our present “notions of health and sickness are arbitrary, merely subjective, or culturally constructed” (Harris 24).

Harris makes it clear that his thesis is *neither* about how science, from an evolutionary or neurobiological perspective, can explain what “people do in the name of ‘morality’” *nor* about how science can bring about desired improvements in our conditions (44). He is interested in the ability of science to foster our understanding of “what we *should* do and *should* want” individually and collectively— the aim is to “live the best lives possible” (44). But, above all, what Harris does very well in his book is showing us how we can avoid both dogmatism and relativism and still be able to find shared meaning. He gives us an alternative that is more rational, reliable, and universal.

To build upon Harris’s views, our understanding of fundamental concepts is dependent on a core element in their definitions that gives them their meanings. The parameters of the definitions can expand or contract from a culture to another, as times change, and as our understanding evolves. The definition of marriage remains a very good example.

As argued earlier, at its very core, marriage is simply a consensual union recognized by society. In most Muslim countries, marriage is the legal consensual union of one man and up to four women at a time. In some European countries (e.g. Denmark and Belgium), marriage is the legal union of one man and one woman, one man and one man, or one woman and one woman. In some other European countries, marriage is still restricted to opposite-sex couples. Some of these countries recognize some other forms of same-sex unions and some do not. In Canada and the US, both same-sex and opposite-sex marriages are recognized. Furthermore, polygamy is both unrecognized

and criminalized in Western countries, while it is still a legal practice in certain Muslim countries, though socially unfavorable.

Despite these significant differences between religions and cultures, the essence or shared meaning of marriage remains the same. It is a social contract with two main building blocks: 1) consent and 2) recognition. These two elements are objective and cross cultural, while any other addendum attached to the definition of marriage is culture-specific and can be revised or even deleted.

So, for cultures to communicate properly and exchange ideas and theories, the starting point of the dialogue must be an axiomatic understanding of the subject of communication. Rather than discussing marriage and dealing with the unnecessary issues arising from cultural specificity, we simply ought to speak of a consensual union that is socially-recognized. Instead of relying on religious traditions to derive shared meaning or giving up on the idea of finding shared meaning, we can attempt to isolate the essential parts of universally-relevant concepts to facilitate useful discussion. Hence, a meaningful intercultural conversation about same sex marriage is only possible if we resort to the most basic form of the definition of the word “marriage.” Oversimplification remains a major drawback in my argument—albeit a necessary one.

The difficulty to locate shared meaning in religious traditions and the inability of relativism to provide us with any other alternative should not be a source of frustration. Quite the contrary, it should both excite and motivate us to work further. Whether it is Sam Harris’s science of morality or any other hopeful thesis, the possibility of finding shared meaning that transcends culture is very likely. Technological advancements in the field of telecommunications and computing have recently given us countless new concepts that have the exact same meaning across cultures. A smart phone is a smart phone in Europe as much as it is so in Asia, Africa, America, or elsewhere. The same goes for laptops, printers, and all other modern inventions. No reasonable person would demand an external source for defining such words apart from their innate functionality and our experience with them. So, if such terms have effortlessly come to acquire unified transcultural meanings, the argument that the same is possible for other equally (if not more) important terms is luckily more grounded in logic than in wishful thinking.

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