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Ten Theses about Fictionality

Introduction

President Barack Obama, at the end of his speech at the April 28, 2013, correspondents' dinner, praised the journalists who had covered the recent terrorist attack at the Boston Marathon for their exemplary work, emphasizing the importance of thorough, deep-digging journalism that "painstakingly puts the pieces together" and "verifies facts" ("Watch: President Obama" 19:36–19:52).

Just a few minutes earlier, however, Obama had jokingly treated several issues in a way that played fast and loose with verified facts. Among other jests, he an-

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nounced that there would be a new movie by Steven Spielberg called *Obama*. This movie, modeled on Spielberg's highly praised *Lincoln*, would again feature Daniel Day-Lewis in the role of the title character; the president showed the correspondents a video including a purported interview with the actor and excerpts from the alleged movie. "Day-Lewis" talks about how hard it was to learn the president's accent and how impossible it seems to him to have to wear Obama's ears every day. Not only is Spielberg making no such movie but the figure Obama refers to as "Daniel Day-Lewis" is Obama himself ("Watch: President Obama" 15:35–18:00).

Obama's performance in this single speech suggests that for him there is no contradiction between valuing verified facts and the playful assertion of manifest falsehoods. There is no contradiction because Obama and his audience share an understanding of the distinction between fictionality and nonfictionality, or what we'll call fictive and nonfictive discourse. More generally, Obama's performance depends on the ease with which he and his audience can move between the two kinds of discourse, and this ease in turn depends on their extensive experience with fictive discourse outside the boundaries of generic fictions such as the short story, the novel, and the fiction film. In this essay, we aim to reconsider the nature and scope of fictionality as part of a call to re-orient the study of fiction and its functions in culture.

Fictionality in the form of the intentional use of invented stories and scenarios (not just spoofs like Obama's, but also what-if projections, if-only regrets, thought experiments, and hypotheses of all kinds) is ubiquitous in our culture. Fictionality is employed in politics, business, medicine, sports, and throughout the disciplines of the academy; indeed, it is difficult to think of a cultural sphere from which fictive discourse is absent—unless, as in airport security areas, it is explicitly banned (and the need to ban it is itself a sign of its ubiquity). Fictionality is, among other things, a vehicle for negotiating values, weighing options, and informing beliefs and opinions. Yet, apart from the work by literary critics on generic fiction, fictionality is almost completely unstudied and often unacknowledged. Even the widely-heralded "narrative turn" toward the importance of storytelling in different disciplines has not led to a focus on the pervasiveness and significance of fictionality.[1]

In order to initiate such an inquiry, our first move is to distinguish between, on the one hand, fiction as a set of conventional genres (novel, short story, graphic novel, fiction film, television serial fiction, and so on) and, on the other hand, fictionality as a quality or fictive discourse as a mode. In this way fictionality/fictive discourse is formally closer to irony/ironic discourse than to an individual genre such as comedy or tragedy, though of course its effects are different. Where a genre designation provides a global framework for understanding a text as a whole, irony may either be global or local. It may provide a framework for thinking about a text such as "A Modest Proposal," but it may also appear intermittently within a text governed by a different generic framework, as with Shakespeare's use of the Fool in *King Lear*. Thinking of fictionality as similarly flexible opens our eyes not only to its widespread presence outside of generic fictions but also to its multiple functions.

Our second move is related to this point about multiple functions. We emphasize that the use of fictionality is not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world, a context which also in-

forms an audience's response to the fictive act. Fictive discourse is clearly distinct from lying, since lies are designed to be taken as referring to actual states of affairs. Fictive discourse neither refers to actual states of affairs nor tries to deceive its audience about such states. Instead it overtly invents or imagines states of affairs in order to accomplish some purpose(s) within its particular context. Those purposes can vary widely—sometimes fictive discourse is a strategy for generating a fresh perspective; sometimes it is an implicit argument for change—but all purposes derive from the fictive discourse's concern with its context. In this respect, fictive discourse is not ultimately a means of constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world but rather a means for negotiating an engagement with that world. Fictive discourse is not a framed or second-order imitation of nonfictive discourse, but rather fictive and nonfictive discourse represent two options for engaging with the actual world.

This view leads to a fresh conception of generic fictions such as the novel and the fiction film as conventionalized forms of discourse. In addition, this view leads to the understanding that the rich cultural history of such forms was made possible by a formal demarcation and elaboration of the rhetorical resources of a fictionality already pervasive within primarily nonfictive discourse.

Our third move is to advance a general claim on the basis of both the pervasiveness of fictionality and the facility of speakers and audiences with it. The ability to invent, imagine, and communicate without claiming to refer to the actual is a fundamental cognitive skill, one crucial to humans' interactions with their world and their fellow beings in that world.

Below we expand on these views in the form of ten theses. Our perspective is rhetorical throughout. Rhetoric is prevalent wherever and whenever someone wants to move someone else to do or think or change something; in other words, rhetoric is inherent in the intentional nature of communication. A rhetorical approach wants—among many other things—to ask how somebody uses particular techniques, strategies, and means to achieve particular ends in relation to particular audience(s). Approaching fictionality rhetorically entails assuming that it is a means to an end. This perspective does not exclude other approaches to fictionality, such as psychological, cognitive, semiotic, or aesthetic ones. On the contrary, these can all contribute to and supplement a rhetorical understanding. The questions we want to foreground, though, are rhetorical: "When, where, why, and how does someone use fictionality in order to achieve what purpose(s) in relation to what audience(s)?"

We turn now to our ten theses, the first of which recapitulates much of what we have been arguing so far.

1) Fictionality is founded upon a basic human ability to imagine.

Stories presented as invented are regularly and pervasively employed in political rhetoric; as vehicles of cultural memory and ideological negotiation of past and present; in thought experiments, scenario thinking, and risk assessments; and in many other areas of the societal, political, and cultural field. The use of fictionality depends on a

capacity to invent which offers its audience an invitation to imagine and interpret. Human beings are concerned not only with matters of fact and with what is the case but also with evaluative questions that encompass possibilities and alternatives—with what is not the case and could never be the case, with what is not the case but could be the case, with what should have been the case, and so on. Fictive discourse invites the reader or listener to imagine something—to ask, often tendentiously, "What if?" In the Obama example, for instance: What if things were this way? What if black were white and white were black, and what if I were someone else? If some things were different, how would those differences affect other things?

Because we "regularly and pervasively employ" fictionality outside of generic fictions, nonfictive discourse is peppered with hypotheticals, counterfactuals, speculations, and other deviations from the actual. The old adage is that politics is the art of the possible, but its constant projection of a new, brighter future just around the corner from the next election goes beyond the rhetoric of possibility (and the rhetoric of promises). Politics is also an art that deals in the rhetoric of fictionality.

Finally, the ability to understand the real and the actual in terms of the possible and the imagined seems to be specific to human beings (though we remain open to the possibility that this ability is not unique to our species).

2) Even as fictive discourse is a clear alternative to nonfictive discourse, the two are closely interrelated in continuous exchange, and so are the ways in which we engage with them.

Even as the domains of the actual and the non-actual remain distinct and different, they are often so closely interrelated that opinions about real life can be strongly affected and changed by fictional examples, stories, and arguments. On the face of it, this claim appears paradoxical: how can information that we understand to be untrue contribute to our engagement with truth and reality? It is not at all obvious how truth-directed reasoning can rely on excursions into fictionality, or how opinions about real life can be strongly affected by fictive illustrations, stories, and arguments, and yet this is clearly the case as a little reflection on our discourse experiences—and the arguments we advance below—will indicate.

3) The rhetoric of fictionality is founded upon a communicative intent.

In fictive as well as nonfictive discourse there is a communicative agent who intends to speak fictively, nonfictively, or to blur the line between the fictive and the nonfictive status of her discourse. In other words, communicative agency and intention are more significant than any a priori divide between fiction and nonfiction based solely on textual features. It makes sense, therefore, to examine narratives and other communicative acts in the pragmatic context of the intent of their producers (however

inferred), including the intent to invoke a fictive rhetoric. We recognize that intentions may not be successfully executed and that inferences about even well-executed intentions can be mistaken. Indeed, we know these phenomena from our own experiences as speakers and listeners and as writers and readers. Nevertheless, this recognition points to the significance of intention in our understanding of communications. The notion of miscommunication due to a mistaken inference about intention entails the notion of an appropriate inference; and again experience provides pragmatic confirmation that we often make valid inferences about another's intention.

This thesis also guides our approach to such phenomena as dreams, myths, and children's role playing. Dreams typically represent non-actual events but they are not intentional acts in the same way that Obama's spoof at the correspondents' dinner is. In other words, they are not founded upon a communicative intent, and so they fall outside the scope of our concerns. Myths may or may not describe actual events, but from our perspective what matters is whether they are intended to describe actual events. If they are so intended, then they are nonfictional, and if they are not so intended, they are fictional. (If they are intended to be fictional but taken as nonfictional, then we have a case of miscommunication or misunderstanding much like any other one—see thesis five below.) Children's role playing ("I'll be the mommy and you be the daddy") is an example of fictionality, since it depends on the children's intent to pretend to be people other than themselves.

4) From the perspective of the sender, fictionality is a flexible means to accomplish a great variety of ends.

A sender can signal fictive intent in various ways: paratextually (*Atonement: A Novel*), metatextually ("Consider this scenario"), through certain uses of the affordances of the medium (in speech, significant changes in one's tone of voice), as well as through foregrounded violations of the conventions of nonfictive discourse. The crucial point is that fictionality attaches to the communicative act, not the object of representation: in uses of fictionality outside of generic fictions, a sender does not transform nonfictional subject matter into something fictional but rather adopts a distinct communicative stance, inviting the audience to recognize that she has temporarily stopped conforming to the constraints of referentiality and actuality in order to accomplish some rhetorical end.

While it is very easy to see why we sometimes speak the truth (we want to share our perceptions and interpretations of the actual world with others, e.g., "The Obama administration botched the rollout of the Affordable Care Act") and why we sometimes lie (on these occasions we think we can better serve our own interests if we have our audiences believe something false about the actual world, e.g., "I did not have sex with that woman"), it may be less easy to see why we use fictive discourse. Consider the following example, courtesy of Stefan Iversen.[2]

During the 2012 US presidential campaign, Obama responded to one of Mitt Romney's attacks by saying that "we've got to name this condition that he's going

through. I think it's called 'Romnesia.' That's what it's called. I think that's what he's going through." ("President Obama in Fairfax" 0:46–1:06) Obama was not claiming to identify and diagnose a previously unrecognized affliction, something to be included in the next edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Instead he was fictively offering such a diagnosis, and he relied upon the playful pun on *amnesia* to alert his audience to both his move into a fictive mode and his purpose of calling attention to what he regarded as Romney's highly selective memory. In this way, he used fictionality as a means to the ends of parrying Romney's attack and wittily making one of his own. Obama's performance here illustrates just one of the many ways in which speakers turn to fictionality to negotiate their relations with actual states of affairs.

5) From the perspective of the receiver, fictionality is an interpretive assumption about a sender's communicative act.

From a rhetorical perspective, to ascribe fictionality to a message is to infer the sender's intent. While receivers are of course free to ascribe fictionality to any act of communication, only some of those ascriptions will match the intentions of the sender. Furthermore, there is a marked difference in the rhetorical exchange between sender and receiver in cases in which the intention and the ascription are well matched and cases in which they are not. If Romney were to respond to Obama by producing a doctor's note asserting that Mitt does not suffer from Romnesia, a large proportion of his audience would conclude that both Romney and his doctor are tone-deaf; and by "tone-deaf" they would mean "deaf to fictionality." (Note our own drift toward fictionality in this example). Similarly, the ascription of fictionality to acts of communication designed to be nonfictional can impede effective communication, as anyone knows who has tried to convince an audience of the truth of some extraordinary event ("Jim Phelan outscored Julius Erving in a college basketball game") only to be greeted with responses such as "Stop pulling my leg" or "In your dreams." In these ways, the ascription of fictionality to a message can be usefully compared to the ascription of irony to a message. We will return to this point in thesis seven below.

6) No formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse.

A rhetorical conception of fictionality makes it a cultural variable rather than a logical or ontological absolute; fictionality is therefore relative to communicative contexts rather than intrinsic to the discourse itself. No technique is found in all fiction and/or only in fiction, even though *within certain cultural and historical contexts* certain textual features can become strong conventional indices of a fictive communicative intent (e.g., zero focalization in the era of the realist novel). Thus, while some techniques can contextually signal fictive intent, there is no necessary homology of

form and function, and techniques follow from communicative purposes, not the other way around. A skillful author of nonfictive discourse may take any technique that is currently assumed to be exclusive to fiction and make it function to nonfictive ends. This point also means that, from our perspective, it is wiser to talk about degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction. While fictionality resides in context rather than text, some flights of fancy have higher and longer orbits than others. Obama's riff on Spielberg's new movie has a greater degree of fictionality than his charge that his rival in 2012 suffers from Romnesia.

Paratextual indices can strongly signal generic fictionality, as when an author labels a text "novel"; but even such cues may be ambiguous and not all-decisive, as cases such as Dave Eggers's *What Is the What,* with its account of the experiences of the historical person Valentino Deng, indicate. Furthermore, the use—and manipulation—of paratextual indices is not limited to generic fictions: a politician can play with paratextual signaling as Obama does when he offers to screen his official birth video—only to show the birth scene from *The Lion King.*

7) Signaling or assuming a fictive communicative intent entails an attitude toward the communicated information that is different from attitudes toward nonfictive discourse.

There is a large difference between reading with the assumption that a story is fictive and reading with the assumption that the story is not fictive. As Henrik has argued elsewhere, this difference allows for un-naturalizing reading strategies when reading certain fictive narratives because readers do not need to limit the narrative possibilities to what is credible in stories about non-invented, actual states of affairs. More specifically, some fictive narratives may have temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that audiences would construe as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or implausible in real-world storytelling situations. Yet in line with thesis six even such implausibilities or impossibilities can be used as parts of a globally nonfictive discourse. That is, for example, the case in some passages in Eggers's *What Is the What,* where Valentino Deng narrates events neither he nor anyone else actually witnessed.

We can analyze the interplay of fiction and nonfiction in such cases by distinguishing between global and local fictionality. Global fictions can contain passages of nonfictionality, and global nonfictions can contain passages of fictionality. Thus, nonfictionality can be subordinate to fictive purposes, and fictionality can be subordinate to nonfictive purposes.

Again a brief comparison with irony is illuminating: it makes a fundamental difference in our response whether or not we assume that a person or a text is being ironic. The same holds true for fictionality: like irony, it is a quality that we can contextually assume a text or a passage possesses in order to make it relevant and to understand it. And just like the assumption about irony, the assumption that a text or passage is intended fictively radically alters our reception of it. If we assume—rightly or

wrongly—that a discourse is ironic, we assume that it means something different from what it says—maybe the opposite of what it says. If we assume—rightly or wrongly—that a discourse is fictive, we read it as inviting us to assume (among other things) that it is not making referential claims, and that its relevance is indirect rather than direct. We also read it as inviting us to assume that its represented objects (whether characters, events, or other things) might be partly or wholly invented and, indeed, may even be impossible in the real world. The assumption of fictionality, like the assumption of irony, changes our interpretive activity and its outcomes.

8) Fictionality often provides for a double exposure of imagined and real.

Fictive communication may invite the reader or listener to map an engagement with representations of *what is not* onto *what is.* This mapping can substantially affect his or her sense and understanding of what is. Fictive discourse in the form of a dystopia or utopia prompts the reader to map an imagined future onto a present that is very different from that future. This strategy has perhaps never been more successfully or more famously used than by Martin Luther King Jr. in his "I have a dream" speech. Here, today's dream is imagined as tomorrow's reality, and King asks his audience to see today's inequality through the lens of the imagined racial equality of the future. (Unlike an actual dream, the metaphorical one King refers to is wholly determined by his communicative intent to use fictionality to express his actual vision of racial equality.) The effect is both an affirmation of that vision of equality, and an emphasis upon its current unreality. King achieves this effect by repeating two phrases: "I have a dream that *one day* . . ." with a stress on *one day;* and "I have a *dream* today" with a stress on *dream.* Especially effective in this context are the very last words: "And when this happens [. . .] all of God's children [. . .] will [. . .] sing [. . .] we are free at last!" Here the expression of freedom is in the present tense but as an imagined song to be sung in the future. King maps the time of the told onto the time of the telling. This mapping creates a kind of double exposure of present and future, and the specific force of fictionality here depends upon the dreaming. The dream is that this *is* the future; in the present (today) it is a dream, a fiction. As a fiction it both affirms the priority of the values it articulates over the question of its truth as a vision, and allows that it may not be true—this might not be the future. There's work to be done.

This seemingly paradoxical double quality of some uses of fictionality, that it is not meant to be understood as true and yet is meant to shape our beliefs about the actual world, is often apparent across diverse realms of discourse. In testimonies and other texts of cultural memory, fictionality is sometimes an indispensable part of telling about a historical past that involved atrocities that are extremely difficult to represent in standard nonfictive discourse. Art Spiegelman's instantly canonized graphic narrative *Maus,* where Jews are portrayed as mice, Nazis as cats, etc., uses fictionalization in order to capture aspects of that atrocious past that could not be as effectively captured with nonfictive representations. In thought experiments and risk assess-

ments, imagined scenarios play a now-conventional role in evaluating the validity of theories and assumptions. In immersive environments, fictionality sometimes plays a significant role in the education of those immersed. For example, in serious games such as *Playmancer* in the health sector, fictive participation in simulated experiences and environments can motivate patients (e.g., those suffering from fibromyalgia) to engage in bodily exercises with a healing effect (Brooks, Petersson Brooks, and Haga).

9) The affordances of fictionality have—for better or worse—consequences for the ethos of the sender—and often for the logos of the global message.

Like other rhetorical actions, the use of fictionality has consequences for the ethos of the author. Obama's invention of Romnesia, relying on both irony and self-control, gives him an appealing ethos. He has every reason to be mad about Romney's distortions of the past, but he stays calm. He creates empathy for himself and shows goodwill to the audience. He keeps his wit and seems in total control. One can even say that in the classical rhetorical terms of Aristotle he shows all three ethos-components—eunoia, phronesis and arête—and he largely does so by means of fictionality.

In addition, a speaker's use of fictionality will tend to make her point irrefutable. Since the deployment of fictionality takes one's discourse into the realm of the nonfactual, its assertions cannot be directly contradicted. In saying that his opponent suffers from Romnesia, Obama presents Romney as such a flip-flopper that he suffers from a mental illness, and there is really nothing Romney can say to contradict the claim. Of course, Obama has not *really* accused Romney of being sick, which—as a nonfictive assertion—would be outrageous; but this is the very reason Romney cannot effectively counter Obama's attack. To insist that he does not suffer from Romnesia would be to deny something which has not been asserted. You can fight fiction with counter-fiction, of course, but that is something different altogether. The employment of fictionality in political discourse will tend to contribute—again for better or worse—to a logos-immunization of the discourse whereby arguments and counter-arguments have to take place on other levels and with other forms of appeal than those based in facts and documented evidence.[3]

Of course not all ethos-building by means of fictionality will inevitably be positive. The use of fictionality, like the use of all other rhetorical strategies, can certainly backfire. Such effects, for example, sometimes occur in commercials. Commercials in general are a very good place to study fictionality because fictionality is so openly and explicitly put to real-world use in a rhetorical situation where it is very clear that someone (typically a company) wants to move someone else (typically the consumer) to do something (typically to buy a product). The means to achieve this end are very often fictional (from talking geckos [Geico] to talking corn chips [Tostitos]). But if a commercial comes across as ethically flawed, rhetorically dishonest, or even just boring (and there is a lot of work to be done on what triggers such reactions, since many commercials with unproblematic receptions are outrageously improbable and

outwardly implausible), this outcome will negatively affect the ethos of the company sponsoring it. One spectacular example was a multimillion kroner campaign by Denmark's largest bank, "Den Danske Bank," called "New Normal, New Standards." In this commercial, fictive and real events are presented in rapid, aesthetically pleasing sequences including one sympathetically depicting members of "Occupy Wall Street," all as a part of what DDB wants the viewer to imagine as the new normal. The effects of the campaign and the commercial were disastrous for the ethos of DDB, because viewers regarded the commercial as claiming positions for DDB (such as solidarity with the "Occupy" movement) that were completely incompatible with so many of its actions. The commercial inspired all kinds of parodies and new slogans such as "New Normal, Double Standards" that used fictionality to skewer the company and that damaged its reputation.

10) The importance of fictionality has been obscured by our traditional focus on fiction as a genre or set of genres.

The conflation of fictionality theory with fiction theory has been to the detriment of both, since it has meant a general neglect of the study of fictionality outside fiction as well as of some of the most important cultural functions of fiction itself. The two most prevalent current approaches to fictionality are both deficient for this purpose, though they could remedy each other if brought together within a larger rhetorical framework. The two approaches are, on the one hand, an interest in human imagination/Vorstellungskraft in general from a philosophical perspective, which normally treats it abstractly and with no real attention to its contextual, empirical (cultural, textual, rhetorical, communicative) manifestations; and, on the other hand, a narrow focus on generic fiction within literary studies and narrative theory, with no interest in examining its relation to the broader and more fundamental phenomenon of fictive discourse. When brought together under the umbrella of rhetoric the two approaches can help us begin to understand the connection between our fictive ability in general and its singular, empirical manifestations. We can increase our understanding by examining the ways in which the ability finds expression, and by asking how, when, where, and why people choose to exercise it.

Our approach, thus, connects the question of fictionality to its nonfictional purposes as it arises in real-world contexts. But we also want to address the value of actual fictions. We believe that our rhetorical approach helps us understand some aspects of what generic fictions do and how they contribute to shaping our perception of the real world. Consider, for example, Suzanne Collins's fictional trilogy *The Hunger Games*.

The trilogy, in the fashion of many dystopian novels, uses fictionality to defamiliarize our perceptions, to foreground aspects of reality that we might overlook. "Justice Hall" is where people are shot dead for whistling. "Peacekeepers" are soldiers—carrying out the executions. With these locutions, Collins invites us to look for real-world instances of politics distorting our language. But the trilogy communicates much more than these Orwellian thematic points. It invites our ethical and

emotional alignment with the perspective of a protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, who has to negotiate a state of affairs and a system of values that is not in any direct, literal sense like the reality we know. Fictionality here is not an escape mechanism, but rather an invitation to extrapolate the relevance of the story to our understanding of and engagement with our reality. Several times Collins shows Katniss facing either/or choices where both options are ethically unacceptable, and then shows how Katniss finds a way to refuse the either/or and instead to transform the entire structure of her situation. Thus, the fictional Katniss provides a model that we can try to emulate, though we of course have to find our own particular solutions to our particular dilemmas. Other elements of the series have other relevance to the actual world. Mockingjays are birds that—like Katniss, and like the books—repeat a message about the possibility of revolution and of change. In one sense the series is a contemporary version of the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird,* only here fiction does not primarily address racial inequality, but more broadly a fight against inequality and oppression and for justice and equality.

By emphasizing the continuity between cases of such fictive rhetoric across the divide between fictional and nonfictional genres of discourse, we aim to elucidate the importance of—and to clarify the cultural work of—fictionality in both domains. *The Hunger Games,* Martin Luther King Jr.'s and Barack Obama's speeches—the list could go on and on—offer us imaginary perspectives, but our interpretive engagement with them is continuous with the more direct ways we make sense of our lives and world, and can heavily influence the terms—ethical, emotional, ideological—in which we do so. For better and for worse, fictionality changes the world and the ways we perceive it.

Endnotes

1. We cannot deal with all aspects of the nature and significance of fictionality/fictive discourse within the limits of this article. But we advance our ten theses as a foundation for a larger project built on the principle that fictionality, far from being escapist or irrelevant for our real-world understanding, is a valuable, oft-employed means to affect our understanding of and reasoning about what is actual, factual, and real. The project's ultimate goal is to develop a unified theory of fictionality that will offer a viable account of its manifestations across diverse genres and discourses (from literary fictions to political campaigns, from legal arguments to philosophers' thought experiments) without erasing the differences among them. We append a list of works not cited in the essay but relevant to our larger project in the "For Further Reading" section.
2. For more about the case see Iversen and Skov Nielsen, "Fictionality and Political Rhetoric."
3. We owe this point and the term "logos-immunization" to Stefan Iversen.

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