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Ralph H. Johnson
University of Windsor

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Title: More on Arguers and Their Dialectical Obligations

Author: Ralph H. Johnson

Response to this paper by: Frans H. van Eemeren

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1. Introduction: The Problem of Dialectical Adequacy

At the end of my paper for the last conference (1999), I posed a series of questions: "What is dialectical adequacy? What are the arguer's dialectical obligations? How are we to understand the notion of an "obligation" in this context?"¹ In my paper for this conference, I pursue the first and second questions, in that order.

What is dialectical adequacy? It is widely understood that one who puts forth an argument has some sort of obligation to respond in a satisfactory way to objections and other material directed at, or pertinent to, that argument. Finocchiaro (1980, 419) writes: "An argument is a defense of its conclusions from actual or potential objections." In *Mind, Language and Society*, Searle (1998, 20) writes: "Since arguments have been presented against realism, we have to answer them in detail. So, here goes." Searle calls these "challenges" and proceeds to identify and then respond to four of them. Does Searle's response achieve dialectical adequacy? Yes, provided that (a) he has responded to the challenges that he should be responding to and (b) his response to them is satisfactory, or better, compelling.

Or consider the famous article from the *Summa Theologiae* (I,2,a) in which Aquinas "proves" the existence of God. The argument has a clearly dialectical structure (as all articles in the *Summa* do). Aquinas starts by raising the question (the issue under discussion). He then cites "material" that opposes the thesis he will ultimately defend. (I use the term "material" purposely to avoid having to offer a more precise specification.) Aquinas then cites a reason (usually taken from an "authority" of some sort, such as Aristotle, Albert the Great, or Averroes) to support the thesis he intends to defend. It has thus been shown that there are reasons both for and against the thesis. Aquinas then gives his argument (what I call the illative core), laying out the reasons that support the thesis he is defended. Finally, Aquinas responds to the "material" cited at the beginning (this response constituting what I would call the dialectical tier).²

¹ In *Manifest Rationality* (hereafter: MR), I called this The Specification Problem: "If the arguer is required by the nature of argument to deal with objections and criticisms, how are we to specify which ones?" (326). Govier (1997/1999b) refers to this problem as "The Discrimination Problem" (228). I shall not here review my earlier position on this problem, nor Govier's critique of my views (1997/1999a/1999b), nor my response to her critique (1999).

²This argument bears the stamp of features I have identified (MR, 159-64) as characteristic of the practice of argumentation. It is teleological--the purpose here is rational persuasion. Aquinas wants to show that there are good reasons that support the claim that God exists and why it. The argument is clearly dialectical--the arguments and reasons of others that have a bearing on the issue have been heard. And the argument exhibits the trait I call manifest rationality, for in bringing into the argument these other voices (objections) and responding to them, the argument not only is rational, but it has also the appearance of rationality. We see the reasons to support the thesis, the reasons against it, and Aquinas's response to them

Does Aquinas's argument achieve dialectical adequacy? To determine this we must assess the cogency of his "dialectical tier." That is, we must ask: "Did Aquinas bring into his argument the best (the strongest, the most relevant) objections against his thesis?" If it turns out that there is a very strong objection that Aquinas has failed to take up in his argument, that would count as a weakness in his argument. We will wonder why he did not address himself to that particular objection and how he would have dealt with it. Nor will be persuaded by his argument until that objection has been addressed. Thus, not only must Aquinas address such dialectical material, but also he must do so in a satisfying way.

By dialectical adequacy, then, I mean how well the argument responds to the various sorts of dialectical material that may gather around it. There are two principal questions involved in the issue of dialectical adequacy. The first question is: "What are the arguer's dialectical obligations?" The second is: "What must the arguer do to respond satisfactorily to such material?" Only the first question will concern us here.

2. A Rational Policy for Determining the Arguer's Dialectical Obligations

To the question "What are the arguer's dialectical obligations?" I propose the following reply: "The arguer's dialectical obligations are conditional³ and proportional." Let me explain. The arguer's obligations are conditional rather than categorical. The arguer must respond to criticisms, *if* the arguer wishes to remain a participant in the process. The obligations are proportional to the situation; that is, the precise nature and extent of the obligation will depend on the specifics of the situation. Now, there are two basic postures in which the arguer finds herself. Either the arguer is in the phase of constructing the argument in which case one is expected to anticipate (certain) objections and perhaps other types of material (the dialectical tier). Or the arguer is in the phase of revision: he or she is dealing with criticisms and other sorts of responses. The arguer's obligations will vary, depending on which situation obtains. In this paper, I shall be concerned mainly with the latter situation.

I now propose the following principle: the arguer has a *prima facie* duty to respond to *all* the dialectical material directed at the argument. What's the justification for this principle? There are two lines, one generic and having to do with the nature of human discourse, the other specific to argumentation. The generic justification is just this: when someone responds to something you have said, courtesy and civility dictate a response.⁴ But there is a rationale more specific to the practice of argumentation: If someone raises an objection to your argument or makes a criticism of it, and your goal is to persuade your audience rationally to accept your thesis, it does not seem that you can hope to accomplish it without dealing with that objection or criticism. Your audience will want to know how you propose to handle the objection, and it will be rational of them to withhold acceptance of your argument until you have done so. Thus, if the arguer wishes to achieve the purpose of rational persuasion, he must take such material in hand, as Aquinas does. Moreover, the constraint I call manifest rationality (Johnson 2000, 163-64) also requires that the arguer respond to all material, if possible. If there is an objection and the arguer doesn't respond to it, then even though he might well be justified in not responding to it, the

³ I am grateful to Erik Krabbe (1999) for bringing this point home to me. For purposes of this paper, I am not dealing with the question of what type of obligation is involved here.

⁴ Stephen Carter (1998,139) makes this point nicely.

argument will not have the appearance of rationality. It will appear that the arguer is shirking his responsibilities.

The discharge of the obligation in this principle should not prove too onerous because for the most part, the responses the arguer receives have either been solicited specifically--asking someone for a response--or else they are introduced into the dialectical space surrounding the argument (book reviews, critical reviews, responses, other papers, etc.) Responses are typically fewer (and less praiseworthy) than the arguer might hope. Most of us experience the fate that led to Hume's famous complaint that his work "fell dead-born from the press."⁵ We wonder: Is anyone listening?

A problem would occur if the arguer were to receive too many responses. Searle claims to have been in such a position. He once wrote (private e-mail communication) "If I responded to everybody who objected to my views, I would have time for nothing else."⁶ Suppose then that the arguer is swamped. In accordance with the deontological principle that "ought implies can," the arguer cannot be obligated to do something that she cannot do. Here the principle suggested above won't work. What, then, are the arguer's options in this situation?

The arguer can simply throw up his hands and say: "I can't deal with all this" and do nothing. It does not take much reasoning to expose the unsatisfying nature of this response. If the arguer cannot deal with all, still the arguer can and should deal with some, viz., the most important. Or: the arguer may decide to respond to just those objections and criticisms he believes she can dispose of. Again, it does not take much so see that this selective approach is not rationally satisfactory. We want to see how the arguer will respond to such objections, but the mettle of the argument is determined even more by how the arguer deals with the more demanding and more difficult dialectical material, the sort of criticism which seeks to undermine the argument. Or: the arguer may simply choose the responses that interest him or her the most--citing something like Harman's principle for adding new beliefs.⁷ Though interest has some claim to being among the criteria used to determine a rational policy, it should not form the basis for the policy. The arguer might have no interest in a criticism that is crucial in determining the real worth of the argument. Finally, the arguer may wish to deal with the manifold in a principled, rational way. What policy shall guide the arguer?

Let me pause for a moment to make two comments. First, it is more than a little surprising to note that the literature of argumentation theory contains no explicit answer to this question, so

⁵ The passage appears in "My Own Life" in an entry dated April 18, 1776. runs: "Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots. But being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine temper, I very soon recovered the blow, and prosecuted with great ardour my studies in the country." I am grateful to my colleague, R.C. Pinto, for locating the source of this quotation.

⁶ In a similar vein, Martin Luther King wrote: "Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work." It is interesting to note that King does not seem to consider that responding to criticism is constructive work. I have argued that anyone who enters into argumentative space in effect makes a commitment to engage in such as part of the very work of argument.

⁷ Harman (1986) proposes, as a principle of reasoning, that one should add a new belief only when one is interested in it.

far as I am aware. Second, the problem envisaged here exists primarily for theories of argument that focus on the argument-as-product. Process-oriented theories, like Pragma-Dialectics or various systems of dialogue logic, face no such problem. In Pragma-Dialectics, Rule 2 requires that a party who advances a standpoint is obliged to defend it if the other party asks him to do so. About this rule, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 117) say:

The question is, however, whether a party who has advanced a standpoint can in reasonableness be expected always to take up the challenge. In our opinion, there are two important cases where the rule does not apply.

The first case occurs when the same standpoint has to be defended against an attacker against whom it has already been defended while nothing has changed in the point of departure....

The second case ... occurs when the challenger refuses to tie himself down to any rules, presumptions or other starting points.

Apart from these situations, it appears that Pragma-Dialectics requires the arguer to respond to challenges of any sort from the interlocutor. By the very nature of the situation, these responses will come one at a time, so our problem will not occur here.

To develop a rational policy, we will have to take into account a number of factors. Certainly the policy must take into account the context, which would include the setting for the argument, as well as the audience. One can be expected to do more in a book than a paper, more in a paper for a journal than a 10 page paper for a conference etc. The policy must take into account the arguer's own limitations: the arguer cannot be expected to reply to objections that she cannot be expected to be aware of. The arguer will have limits of other sorts; one can only spend so much time in this exercise. The policy should probably accord some role to the interest of the arguer, for not all responses will be of equal interest. Finally, we must take into account the type of dialectical material on the grounds that some types of material may have a greater claim on the arguer than others. In this paper, I focus on developing only this aspect of such a policy.

3. A Typology of Dialectical Material

What are the various types of dialectical material? Blair (1998) refers to such material when he writes:

We, as teachers and scholars, are all familiar with the need to vary the nature of the arguments we use when in the lecture hall from those we use in the journal article. The qualifications, provisos, distinctions, objections to be dealt with that are a must in our arguments when we go into scholarly print will only confuse, and lose the attention of, the students in the introductory class.

Blair mentions "qualifications," "provisos," "distinctions," and "objections." We could add "criticisms," "replies," "challenges," "difficulties," "observations," "questions," "requests for clarification," etc.--indeed any sort of material which might be directed at the argument, whether as challenge or support. I will call all such "dialectical material," "dialectical" because it is part of the give-and-take back-and-forth between the arguer and the Other (the audience, interlocutor(s), respondents etc.). I use the term "material" rather than "response" because there is a kind of material that collects around an argument which, though pertinent to the argument, is not necessarily a response to that particular argument. Here I am thinking specifically of what are called "The Standard Objections" which, over time, collect in "the space" around the argument.

I shall propose a typology according to which we can place all such material into one of five categories. Since informal logicians have been accused of having a predilection for taxonomy (Massey, 1981), it will perhaps allay some concern if I remind us of the purpose of this taxonomy. The aim is to develop a typology that can be used to fashion a rational policy regarding the arguer's obligations when he is contending with too many responses (a la Searle). If we can find a way to prioritize the various types of material, then we can perhaps scale down the obligations to manageable proportions. But first we must develop a typology.

3A. *An Empirical Approach to Developing a Typology*

Let us begin with perhaps the most familiar type of such material--the objection. We will not delay here to attempt to clarify just what an objection is, other than to say that it is a challenge of some sort directed against the argument.⁸ In his book, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Steven Stich (1991, 24-25) writes in a section entitled "Objections to Pragmatism":

For along with the virtues of the view, there were a pair of obvious objections, each of which initially seemed quite overwhelming. The first objection is that pragmatism leads to relativism. And relativism is to be avoided at all costs.

The second objection is that pragmatism is viciously circular, since there is no way we could show that our cognitive system is pragmatically preferable without using the very system whose superiority we are trying to.

Another familiar type of dialectical material is an alternative position; that is, an argument developed to support a conclusion that it incompatible with the arguer's own position. If the arguer is defending the conclusion that a voucher system would improve the quality of education, one alternative would be the position that argues for the conclusion that vouchers are bound to weaken the quality of education. And there are other alternative positions. Although an alternative position may be considered a type of objection and indeed may itself contain objections, still it has a different character. For one thing, it is typically a more dialectically developed product than an objection. By that I mean its structure is more complex, it contains internal or subordinate arguments; it anticipates objections, etc. Further, unlike an objection which comes into being as a response to a particular argument, an alternative position may and usually does exist independently of the argument. For further discussion of this, see Govier (1997/1999b, 224-28). Let this, then, become our second category.

We now add a third category, which I shall call a criticism. Here the respondent takes aim at some specific part of the argument and *argues* that it is flawed or defective. A criticism is, in the scheme I am proposing, necessarily a reasoned response; it takes the form of an argument. An example would be the charge that someone's argument is defective because it is largely *ad hominem*, provided that this latter claim is defended. In its maximum, criticism becomes a critique in which the critic attempts to assess the strengths and the weaknesses of the argument and comes to an overall evaluation of the worth of the argument. (For further discussion of these points, see Johnson and Blair (1993, 233-244.))

⁸ I deal with this matter in detail in my *Objections and Replies* (in progress).

Our initial canvas has turned up three types of dialectical material: objections, alternative positions, criticisms. For the time being, I propose we add a fourth category we shall just call "other." Here we might place such material as observations, questions, requests for clarification, affirmations.

We want some assurance that our budding typology is empirically adequate; i.e., that it can accommodate all of the types of material that we have noted in the give-and-take of argumentation. There is reason to think that our typology can be empirically adequate, at least in the sense that all of the categories we have introduced are in wide use. There are many other types of response that have not yet been brought into the account. For example, where will we locate challenges? Replies? For now, we can assign them to most recently introduced category: Other. The reduction of such material to one of the existing types will not be difficult once we see clearly the underlying structure that gives rise to the scheme. A priori reasoning can sometimes help penetrate the empirical manifold and reveal underlying structure, so let us now approach this matter from that point of view.

3B. An A Priori Approach to Developing a Typology

What would a priori reasoning tell us about types of response to an argument? It would tell us that most responses to an argument will be either positive or negative. It will be positive in case it supports the argument; it will be negative if it seeks to undermine or dislodge. (There is material that is neutral: e.g., when the respondent asks a question that is neither negative nor positive.) Things being the way they are, we may expect that both in the specific case and in the overall scheme of things, the negative will outstrip the positive.⁹ It seems clear that the arguer has a greater responsibility to deal with negative material that could "defeat" his argument than with positive, which in all likelihood would only serve to strengthen it.

Further, a response will either be reasoned--supported by an argument--or not. In the latter case, it will be an assertion or perhaps a question. It seems clear that the arguer has a greater obligation to deal with reasoned responses than with unreasoned ones. Why? Because such material has itself the rationality characteristic of this enterprise-- something lacking in the case of mere assertion. In argumentative space, mere assertion, whether in the argument-phase, response-phase, or response-to-the-response-phase has an unfinished and unsatisfying character.¹⁰

Putting these two features together, we have reason to expect that dialectical material will fall into five categories:

Category 1: Positive and unreasoned. Here we can place such material as questions, positive comments and observations.

Category 2: Positive and reasoned: Here we can place what I could call the positive critique, that is an extended assessment of the strengths and weaknesses which comes out with a positive evaluation.

⁹ In my *Objections and Replies* (in progress), I will attempt to explain why this situation exists.

¹⁰ For an hilarious illustration of this point, see the skit by Monty Python titled "The Argument Clinic." Of course, as is well-known, every argument will have to rest on some premises that are not defended.

Category 3: Negative and unreasoned. Here we can place objections, difficulties, challenges, etc.

Category 4: Negative and unreasoned: Here we can place criticisms, the negative critique, and alternative positions.

Probably we should add a fifth category for what might be called "neutral" material:

Category 5: Neutral, whether reasoned or not. Here we might place questions and requests for clarification.

I believe these five types (one more than our empirical inquiry turned up) will prove sufficient.

3C A Policy for Prioritizing Dialectical Material

I now propose a principle that can be used to limit the arguer's obligations in a rationally responsible and satisfactory way. The arguer has a *prima facie* obligation to respond to *all* material directed at, or relevant to the argument, in proportion to that material's capacity to jeopardize or undermine the argument.¹¹

Before I turn to the task of justifying this principle, I first need to explain some clauses. By "material directed at the argument," I mean any response that comes into being as a direct result of the respondent's having engaged with the argument. "[M]aterial relevant to the argument" would include types of material that might exist independently of the argument—for example, The Standard Objections, and some alternative positions.

The justification for the policy I propose requires reference back to the question of why we argue. Here it must be recalled that my approach to argumentation has been premised on the assumption that the primary purpose of argumentation is rational persuasion. (I cannot argue this here but see Johnson (2000, 149, 158). The arguer constructed the argument to show that the conclusion is rationally justifiable, hence deserves to persuade others. The stronger the argument is, the more likely it is to achieve this purpose. Two lines of thinking attest to the need for the arguer to confront such challenges. First, it has long been thought that the strength of an argument is a function of its capacity to withstand criticism, or as I might prefer to say, to confront and deal with challenges. Second, because the arguer is rational, she is aware that there are very likely to be defects in the argument. Strong criticism is most likely to reveal such defects. If we can now show that it is in the best interest of both the arguer and the respondent to become aware of defects and if we grant that a strong challenge (one that seeks to undermine or jeopardize the argument) is more likely to achieve that than a weak one, we will have the requisite justification for our principle.

To see why it is in the arguer's best interest to become aware of potential defects in the argument, indeed the most serious ones, we must remind ourselves that the arguer put forth the

¹¹ There is another way of looking at this matter, in which the focus would be on the dialectical situation and not the argument; and also on the ability of the material to affect the argument rather than its ability to undermine it. I am grateful to David Hitchcock and Mark Vorobej for bringing this matter to my attention. Their challenges raise larger issues about the nature of the argumentative and dialectical process than I can discuss here.

argument in the hope of persuading the other rationally.¹² The arguer's purpose was not to silence opponents or to appear smarter or to "win." Had she merely wanted to achieve a victory of this sort, she could have used any of various other, more effective methods by which people pursue those ends: flattery, psychological strategies, deceit, power plays and so forth. If the arguer is interested in the argument as an instrument of rational persuasion, then he has a vested interest in becoming aware of any and all serious deficiencies in the argument so that they may if possible be repaired. On the other side of the dialectical fence, the respondent realizes that the point of her criticism is not to devastate the opponent, nor yet the argument. That would be true if this were some other kind of practice--debating, perhaps, or some other form of contest in which winning is the point. But such is not the telos that we have assigned to the practice of argumentation. We take it to be the respondent's obligation to provide the best, i.e., the strongest, criticism. Why? Because strong criticism that gets at the core problems in the argument will show why the argument has not achieved its aim of rational persuasion and at the same time makes clear what the arguer must do to achieve that.

In this way, the interests of the arguer and the critic come together around strong criticism as that which best serves the practice of argumentation as manifestly rational. If the arguer receives strong criticism, then both parties will be better off, and it will be apparent to both (and others) that they are. No result could better serve the requirements of manifest rationality. Examine this first from the perspective of the arguer. If the arguer receives strong criticism, then she must inevitably gain. For either the criticism exposes a real defect in the argument, in which case the arguer must either show that the defect can either be remedied, in which case the argument is now a stronger and more rational product; or else the arguer must find a new argument, in which case a poor line of reasoning has been retired and the interests of rationality have been served, or, else the arguer may have to give up the position, which case again the interests of rationality have been served. Or, the arguer can show that the argument is able to withstand the criticism, in which case its value as a rational product has been further confirmed. It has been tested and met the test. The same result appears if we now review the situation from the perspective of the critic. If it turns out that criticism is easily responded to, then the critic will have learned that the criticism was not so good. If the criticism turns out to have been a strong one, then the arguer must deal with strong criticism.

Suppose, instead, the arguer does not receive strong criticism. Suppose the critic engages in nitpicking, i.e., pursuing small points as though they were major problems. There is a chance that the arguer might succumb to the temptation to pursue these tangents, thereby getting bogged down and retarding rather than advancing the dialectic and diminishing the likelihood that the purpose will be achieved.

Thus whether we review the matter from the perspective of the arguer or the critic, strong criticism turns out to be that which best serves the interests of both rationality and manifest rationality, hence the most desirable form of response.

This then is justification for principle cited above.

¹² Elsewhere I intend to argue that to achieve the purpose of rational persuasion means to produce a rationally warranted position and that *in situ* such a position is most likely to achieve other ends associated with the practice of argumentation, such as advancing the dialectic, and getting (closer) to the truth.

Given the principle stated earlier and the typology, we are now in a position to attempt to prioritize the various types of dialectical material.

It seems clear that material in Category 4 has the strongest claim on the arguer's attention. Here we find material that presents the strongest challenge. The arguer's priority should be to respond to any negative critique. This type of material explicitly aims at revealing the crucial problems with the argument at hand. Because of its focus and degree of dialectical development, it has the greatest potential to undermine the argument.

Next the arguer should attend to any and all specific criticisms that have been directed at the argument. These also have great potential to reveal problems with or defects with the argument. If there are too many criticisms, then the arguer should first deal with the most serious criticisms, those that have the greatest possibility of defeating the argument. (How this is determined is a problem I cannot deal with here.)

It would seem that next in line would be alternative positions, as they also belong to Category 4. However, I can think of two reasons that might lead us to place this type of response a bit further down on the list of priorities. First, unlike the critique and criticisms that have come into being as a direct result of the argument, alternative positions can and often do have an existence independent of the argument. They may already exist in argumentative space. In some sense, they are less proportioned to this particular argument. Second, alternative positions--particularly when they are highly developed dialectically--make greater demands on the arguer. (I realize that these two reasons bring into consideration other factors that will need to be integrated into any rational policy for determining the arguer's obligations.)

Next on the list would be material from Category 3, primarily objections. They are often not themselves in the form of an argument, which lessens their strength. Still a well-put objection can present a significant challenge and has the virtue of having been devised for this specific argument (except in the case of The Standard Objections.) Here again if there are too many objections to deal with, the strongest objections--those that have the greatest potential to undermine the argument--should be first in line.

Next then would be alternative positions, for reasons mentioned above.

Next would be the positive material from Category 2: the positive critique. Typically this sort of dialectical material will not weaken or threaten the argument but only support it. Still there are times when this material will result in the arguer's having to modify or clarify the argument, which will result in its being a better argument.

Last would come material from Category 1 and 5, for it is least likely to reveal significant defects in the argument.

I have thus proposed a typology for dialectical material and presented a rational policy for prioritizing the arguer's dialectical obligations so that they can be made manageable.

4. Conclusion: Value of the Proposed Typology

The value of my proposed typology is that it would allow us to develop a rational policy to prioritize the arguer's obligations, even if one disagrees with my view about the priorities. It also has the benefit of helping us to see more clearly what the content of the dialectical tier would be:

it is reasonable to expect the arguer to anticipate some objections, but not quite so reasonable to expect the arguer to anticipate criticisms which are more developed and more specific.

Strange, then, that such scant attention has been paid to what appears to be an important problem for theories of argument--this whole issue of dialectical adequacy. The absence of such theorizing reveals from another perspective the gap between our theorizing about arguments and best practices.¹³ For the need for a dialectical tier and dialectical obligations have been recognized in practice of argumentation from the very beginning. Theorists have been slow to take this issue up.

A second reason is that when one thinks of arguments this way, as containing a dialectical tier on which the arguer seeks to discharge her obligations, one begins to see that they are quite different in character from inferences/implications; and also from proofs. This issue has implications for the relationship between argument and other forms of reasoning such as inference and implication, on the one hand, and proofs and theories and explanations, on the other hand.

That, then is my proposal regarding a typology of dialectical material. I have thus fulfilled the promise in my title, for I have said something more about the arguer's dialectical obligations. I hope as well to have said something useful. However, the greater task lies ahead, for I have not here said anything to say about the more interesting and more difficult question of what is required to discharge these obligations well. I plan to deal with that and other related questions in a forthcoming work.

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¹³ For more discussion of the gap and its significance, see Chapter 12 of *Manifest Rationality*.

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