

CH X

PromisesXPromises

You can only pay so much for promises.

Motley Fool

Genomics is real. In the end, I am sure its promise will materialize.

Jürgen Drews, former president for global research at Hoffmann-LaRoche

"Biotech valuations in Germany are not built on anything fundamental," says Michael Sistenich, a fund manager at DWS. He says chief executives promise more than they can deliver to build up their valuations.

Financial Times

Linkage analysis and positional cloning have had a remarkable track record in leading to the identification of the genes for many mendelian diseases, all within the time span of the past two decades. Several of these genes account for an uncommon subset of generally more common disorders such as breast cancer (BRCA-1 and -2), colon cancer (familial adenomatous polyposis [FAP] and hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer [HNPCC]), Alzheimer's disease (β -amyloid precursor protein [APP] and presenilin-1 and -2) and diabetes (maturity-onset diabetes of youth [MODY]-1, -2, and -3). These successes have generated a strong sense of optimism in the genetics community that the same approach holds great promise for identifying genes for a range of common, familial disorders, including those without clear mendelian inheritance patterns. But so far the promise has largely been unfulfilled, as numerous such diseases have proven refractive to positional cloning.

Neil Risch, population geneticist

As I've said in the past, [Genentech] has a promising pipeline and room to grow based on its cancer and cardiovascular drugs. . . . The potential for IDEC [Pharmaceuticals] will get better as the company's promising compound Zevalin comes to market. . . . With that in mind, the outlook for the remainder of 2000 is quite promising.

WorldlyInvestor.com

DeCODE promises that Icelanders will get any drugs or diagnostics based on their genes for free during the patent period—a promise [Jórunn] Eyfjörd calls "a joke. . . . How many drugs do you think are going to be developed, and how many people will really benefit from that?"

Science

A promise was made somewhere.

Member of the Althingi (Icelandic Parliament), on how the Health Sector Database Act came to pass

Promises, promises. The colloquialism exposes the always doubled and usually even more multiple qualities of promises. And like the doubled "yeah, yeah" that fissures the most basic truth statement through a mere doubling, "promises, promises" establishes the instability that should rightfully inhere to the simultaneously admirable, commendable, disconcerting, and in any case unavoidable event of promising.

The epigraphs above span genres, contexts, nations, and domains of activity in their multiple instantiations of promising's multiplicity. They cover the territory through which this book is wandering: a complex landscape comprising fissured zones of biotechnological research, economic predictions, bets in the most speculative economy we've witnessed, political deal making, and personal oath taking. Each zone itself is in turn layered with the others, begging for some hyper-geographical information system interface to help us visualize the spectral superimpositions. Sometimes promising's zone is hard if not impossible to map—"a promise was made somewhere"—but unlocalizability does not negate the force of promising.

While promising has been theorized most often in terms of the performative utterance that begins "I promise . . .," locating it in a more or less intentional subject (e.g., a groom) in a more or less secure context

(e.g., a wedding ceremony), this does not delimit promising's work. The few statements quoted above make it clear that molecules are promising, the sciences of those molecules are promising, outlooks are promising, markets are promising, and, yes, people in particular contexts are promising. The differences—swearings, speculations, vowings, hopings, anticipatings, sheer happenings—are as important as what all promisings appear to share: a volatility so radical that promising “never takes place but has always already occurred or is always about to occur. The place of the promise is not here and its time is not now.”¹

Promising occupies the place of the X: not—yet . . . something's coming, on its way, just down the road or pipeline. You can sense it, even if you can't see it. You can bet on it, should you want to gamble on it.

You *should* want to gamble on promising.

You *have* to, anyway, so any exhortation is excessive.

I have preferred, throughout this text, to defer direct theorizing of promising, relying instead on the inferences that ethnographic empiricism offers, or at least promises. I have no doubt tried some readers' patience, and arguing that trials of patience are in fact what the act of promising is about would be impudent, however truthful. But while we may not need, or indeed be capable of, a full theory of promising, some promise of theory may be productive here in the chiasmic middle of the text. So here I gather *some* promising effects that have been treated by J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Shoshana Felman, to help us further tune in to the disparate and disjointed ways in which promising manifests itself in genomics.

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It's no exaggeration to say that everything in Shoshana Felman's book on promising in *Don Juan* and in the philosophical writings of J. L. Austin is inscribed in its main title, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*: promising is always an event involving, and evolving from, an amalgam of language and matter. When the matter is flesh, a human body, we are in the familiar world of weddings and similar events involving the performatives analyzed, albeit in different ways, by all speech act theorists since Austin. But there is no reason why the category “speaking body” should not encompass, say, a molecule, or a segment of a chromosome (“human” and “nonhuman” would lose their distinction here) implicated as one (possibly powerful) force in the developmental event we name a “condition”:

osteoporosis, obesity, schizophrenia, to give only a few names to the volatile but patterned unfoldings that deCODE, like other genomic companies, promises to pursue, if not catch.

Isn't it the case that when genomicists speak, as they so frequently do, of the “genetic predispositions” or “propensities” to which we are all given, that this can be translated (with all the infelicities to which that act is prone) as: your flesh harbors promises; your flesh is bound to promise; your flesh is made flesh, becomes flesh, in its vast and only partially traceable *entrelacements* with the promising forces of words, speech, discourse?² Actual fleshy promisings that, as promised, are nevertheless “not here, not now”?

In other words . . . we've gotten ahead of ourselves.

In his inaugural analysis of speech acts, the 1952 *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin accomplished many things. One of these was to diagram, not the *distinction* between constative and performative statements, but their zones of entanglement. Austin not only “dislocated” any and every easy distinction between the two, but, as Felman so beautifully demonstrates, *took pleasure* in doing so. Far from locating a lack in philosophy, language, or in the world, a lack that would then provoke or produce an effect of mourning, Austin diagrammed the devilish, seductive, scandalous, and above all hilarious “misfires,” overreaches, and slips produced as the plenitudes of both flesh and language slid and smacked and sloshed against each other, and within each other.

Felman uses Austin to pursue Nietzsche's question of the problem of the promising animal (see the final *ch*) and takes “the very logic of promising”—a logic of “a paradox, a problem”—as “a sign of a fundamental contradiction which is precisely the contradiction of the human.”³ Being promising, in other words, is a fundamental aspect of the being of that favorite model organism of genomicists, a human. And this fundamental aspect is fundamentally paradoxical and contradictory.

If these connections between promising, humor, scandal, paradox, and the human seem too hastily drawn, I would only point out that Felman also demonstrates how promising is “tied to a time of speed and urgency”—what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called in another context “the haste function” that stems from “the assertion of anticipated certainty” (Felman, 32). The haste function, as I hope to have shown, certainly operates within the science and business of genomics—economies that compel my complicity just as Mannvernd does: genomics puts *everyone* in a hurry. So I will continue to try to make these fast connections, established by and between the doubled acts of promising animals, hold fast.

To continue attuning ourselves to promising's qualities and effects, we should take into account some of Austin's other analytic achievements. First is his dislocation of the act of promising from the intentional subject:

Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'? This is, though vague, true enough in general—it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. . . . Thus 'I promise to . . .' obliges me—puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle.

It is gratifying to observe in this very example how excess of profundity, or rather solemnity, at once paves the way for immorality. For one who says 'promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!' is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorizers: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space, with all the distinction of a specialist in the *sui generis*. Yet he provides Hippolytus with a let-out, the bigamist with an excuse for his 'I do' and the welsher with a defence for his 'I bet.' Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our deed*.⁴

Again, let's not miss how Austin savors perverting the "vague, true enough" "commonplaces" that we hold as knowledge of promising. It's clear that he relishes—or at least, in that understated British way, finds "gratifying"—the way our model organism's zeal for the profound, the nonsuperficial, and the moral sets the stage, in the event of promising at least, for the corrosion of these very ideals. When we attempt to ground ethics in an interior of intentionality, we open a fissure in that very ground. If promising counts only when a human *really truly* intends it to, then some variation on the classic comeback of kids everywhere is always possible: I had my fingers crossed. Which makes you a jerk, but not a promise breaker.

To the extent that promising can or should be located at all, locating promising in language has the doubled advantage of having ethical enforceability—you said it, you did it—while at the same time being an "accurate" account of things. Promising, after Austin, does not require intentionality; saying will do.

Derrida ratchets the analysis of promising up another notch. Over numerous essays, he has articulated how promising is disseminated throughout language, rather than being the exclusive quality or effect of a particular subset of speech acts, those Austin called "commissives." Derrida thus dislocates promising not only from any intentional subject, but from any localizability in a particular set of speech acts. He dislocates the location of promising entirely, making promising occur as a kind of gen-

eral feature of language—although that's not the most promising way of putting it:

Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, I *promise*. Whether I like it or not: here, the fatal precipitation of the promise must be dissociated from the values of the will, intention, or meaning-to-say that are reasonably attached to it. The performative of this promise is not one speech act among others. It is implied by any other performative, and this promise heralds the uniqueness of a language to come.⁵

An immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without a horizon of expectation, informs all speech. As soon as I speak, before even formulating a promise, an expectation, or a desire *as such*, and when I still do not know what will happen to me or what awaits me at the end of a sentence, neither *who* nor *what* awaits whom or what, I am within this promise or this threat—which, from then on, gathers the language together, the promised or threatened language, promising all the way to the point of threatening and *vice versa*, thus gathered together in its very dissemination. (21–22)

I suggest we trust him on this for now. Derrida's assessment indicates several things for future analyses of promising like this one. First, promising occurs everywhere in language, which is never sufficiently present to itself to fully guarantee all its workings or capacities. Language runs on credit, if you like—which is not to say, as you surely know, that bills don't fall due. Second, the fact that promising occurs everywhere in language means it is also at work, or in play, within the analytic language that produces such a statement as "promising occurs everywhere in language." *Et voilà*: promising turns threatening—and just as quickly turns back again. The promiseXthreat of language is its poisonXgift. Really.

And third: the promise and the decision, "which is to say responsibility, owe their possibility to the ordeal of undecidability which will always remain their condition."⁶ Which could be shortened without too much violence to: no chiasmus, no promise.

It's vital to stress the "ordeal of undecidability," which is decidedly different than something like "the ordeal of uncertainty." When a representative of Hoffmann-LaRoche, for example, says the promise of genomics will materialize, this is not a statement marked by simple uncertainty: maybe he's wrong, maybe he's right, we just don't have enough information to know for sure, so we'll have to take a chance with our money. Statements of promise are undecidable, and that's much more of an ordeal than uncertainty: nothing you can do will quell this volatility that arises not within knowledge, but *beyond* it. Uncertainty mobilizes

efforts in knowing, which can ameliorate the condition, and even cure it. Undecidability calls for promising, and there's no resolution in sight—only a responsibility for a decision, a responsibility shared in different ways by promisor and promisee.

To better understand the important difference, consider Hannah Arendt's treatment of the promise in *The Human Condition*. Starting from Nietzsche's groundbreaking discussion of promising from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Arendt justly emphasizes the centrality of promising to our conceptions of the political. But Arendt gives Nietzsche's promise a rather banal reading, reducing the promise to a human assertion that establishes "an island of certainty" in a future marked by radical uncertainty.⁷ Vague, I can almost hear Austin saying, and "true enough in general," but it misses something crucial. Arendt's promise seeks to anchor an uncertain future through a willing that establishes some certainty.

My promise, as it were, opens a channel to a volatile future that promising itself helps to bring about, a future that *will have provided* the only underwriting the originary promise can be said to have ever had.

That's twisted, you say—and you're right. But my understanding of promising coincides with that of Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan's. Looking back on the frothy times of the late 1990s, the political-cultural economy in which infotech and biotech companies bubbled up together, Greenspan reflected on the undecidability of promising, rather than its mere uncertainty, and thus its unmanageability. "The struggle to understand developments in the economy and financial markets since the mid-1990s," Greenspan said in an August 30, 2002, speech,

has been particularly challenging for monetary policymakers. We were confronted with forces that none of us had personally experienced. Aside from the then recent experience of Japan, only history books and musty archives gave us clues to the appropriate stance for policy. We at the Federal Reserve considered a number of issues related to asset bubbles—that is, surges in prices of assets to unsustainable levels. As events evolved, we recognized that, despite our suspicions, it was very difficult to definitively identify a bubble until after the fact—that is, when its bursting confirmed its existence.

Moreover, it was far from obvious that bubbles, even if identified early, could be preempted short of the central bank inducing a substantial contraction in economic activity—the very outcome we would be seeking to avoid.⁸

In other words, you can't tell you're in a speculative bubble until after it has burst. It only becomes the case that there was nothing underwriting the promise in the future, which the promise helps establish but can't

define. And even if you could *predict* the emptiness of the promise, you can't *preempt* its effects. And that truly is twisted.

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There are a few more things we can come to appreciate about promising and its forces, even if it escapes our predictive and preemptive capacities.

Beyond or outside of an epistemological economy, promising "engages desire and pleasure," Felman's analysis of *Don Juan* via Austin tells us.⁹ Promising works on the level of affect, in the field of the body. If a new molecule, a new gene association, or some other experimental results seem "promising" to a scientist, it's because the result has *engaged* something other than the scientist's cognitive capacities. The power of that engagement, its force, needs to be respected, even if it can't be justified or proved. And the rules of engagement have their own logics, even if those logics are not those of what we traditionally call "scientific rationality." No scientist or science would ever flourish on such a restricted diet, even if scientists risk being misled by these *suprarational* forces that push and pull their work and ideas.

Promising comes, therefore, to be associated with the quotidian, the singular, the field of practice, rather than with the theoretically generalizable:

With Austin as with psychoanalysis, the irreducible triviality of the idiosyncratic is that of a *practice* of the singular.

Of a practice, that is, of what belongs to the order of *doing*. For unlike saying, doing is always trivial: it is that which, by definition, cannot be generalized. . . . Thus true History, belonging to the order of acts or of practice, is always—however grandiose it may be—made up of trivialities.

The same is true of writing. (69)

Analyzing promising, then—or coming to appreciate its forcefulness—is a job for history, ethnography, or other practices that find the trivial important—literature or literary theory, for example.

Lastly, promising is indissolubly linked to scandal. The reasons for this are complex, as are the linkages themselves, and it's important to plumb some of this complexity to keep from falling into a moralism in which "scandalous" is simply equated with "sinful" or "shameful."

Both Austin and Don Juan, Felman shows, take pleasure in "playing the devil," whether that play engages women or the rational, natural distinctions that logic prides itself on. And to "play the devil" is "above all

efforts in knowing, which can ameliorate the condition, and even cure it. Undecidability calls for promising, and there's no resolution in sight—only a responsibility for a decision, a responsibility shared in different ways by promisor and promisee.

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to renounce playing God; that means . . . not believing in the promise of Heaven as the power that underwrites the promising animal; not believing, by the same token, in the promise of the promising animal, even if that animal is oneself” (110). Here is where promising becomes threatening, and threatening to itself in particular:

The devil, in other words, does not take himself for God. With Austin, at the very least, the devil’s chief characteristic is precisely that he *does not know* whether he is playing seriously or not, whether he is or is not in the process of playing or joking. That is the truly diabolical question inherent in joking, or in play. Is it a joke? Is it simply a game? The distinguishing feature of the Austinian performance is not that it turns “seriousness” against “unseriousness,” but rather that it *blurs* the boundary between the two. (96)

This is the “*scandal* of infelicity” that John Searle, Emile Benveniste, and so many other “followers” of Austin in the analytic philosophy tradition can’t assimilate, because it unsettles every analysis, rattles every solid structure. By playing the devil with philosophy, Felman is arguing, Austin ends up tapping into the “radical force of negativity itself,” the undermining of *every* underwriting. Like the “plague” that Freud brought to America in the form of psychoanalysis, this radical negativity is extremely contagious and virulent.

Usually the negative “has always been understood as what is reducible, what is to be eliminated, that is, as what by definition is opposed, is referred, is *subordinated* to the ‘normal’ or to the ‘positive.’” The plague, in other words, is almost always thought to be curable. In still other words, the chiasmus is thought to be dis-entangle-able. “The logic of acts,” says Felman, “thus becomes . . . a *normative logic*” (101). The normative desire is to rid disclosure of all promise, for example, or to rigorously distinguish between trust and gullibility, to cure speculative mania with a solid dose of fundamentals, and so on.

“Now in all these theories (psychoanalysis, the performative, Nietzschean philosophy), radical negativity, as the original thinker understood and grasped it, *cannot* be reduced to a negative that is the simple—symmetrical—contrary of the ‘positive,’ to a reducible negative, caught up in a normative system,” Felman contends. And now the threat—*However will we make judgments!*?—turns back into the promise:

Now if the Austinian negative does not aim simply to treat the negative as a function of the positive, neither does it aim—it aims still less—simply to reduce the positive to the negative. Even though the term “positive” is in the last analysis undone, the defeat of the positive does not involve any nihilistic complacency . . .

“For the sake of folly,” says Nietzsche, “wisdom is mixed in all things. A little wisdom is indeed possible.” If negativity resides, in Don Juan’s case, in the *lack of satisfaction*, Don Juan, in fact, is *never* satisfied, not even—especially not—with negation. If the devil, in other words, refuses above all to play God, it is especially not in order to *believe* in negativity. The “fallible” is not itself infallible; in a world that is fundamentally without guarantees, one cannot be sure of anything at all, not even infelicity. . . .

Thus negativity, fundamentally fecund and affirmative, and yet without positive reference, is above all *that which escapes the negative/positive alternative*. . . .

Radical negativity . . . belongs neither to *negation*, nor to *opposition*, nor to *correction* (“normalization”), nor to *contradiction* (of positive and negative, normal and abnormal, “serious” and “nonserious,” “clarity” and “obscenity”)—it belongs precisely to *scandal*: to the scandal of their nonopposition. (101–4)

This “scandal of the *outside of the alternative*, of a negativity that *is* neither negative nor positive,” is “what history cannot assimilate” but is “nevertheless the *cornerstone* of History” (105, 107). Or in my terms: the chiasmus is outside the alternatives that it crosses and cannot be assimilated by historical or ethnographic understanding, but the operations of chiasma—their admixtures, their volatility, their eruptive flows—are nevertheless what constitute historical and ethnographic understanding. “The scandal, in other words, is always in a certain way the scandal of the promise of love, the scandal of the *untenable*, that is, still and always, the scandal—Don Juan in the extreme—of the promising animal, incapable of keeping his promise, incapable of not making it, powerless both to fulfill the commitment and to avoid *committing* himself—to avoid playing beyond his means, playing, indeed, the devil: the scandal of the speaking body, which in failing itself and others makes an act of that failure, and makes history” (111).

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Why do I give you these excesses, perhaps trying your patience in a time and territory where delimited, practical, *normative* actions seem so urgent? Because promisingXgenomics in lavaXland is a matter of excess. An organism like you, me, or a zebra fish, exceeds its genetic “code.” It exceeds its “nature” or genes, it exceeds its “nurture” or environment (which in turn is always exceeding itself and changing), it exceeds every wonderful technoscientific tool that has ever been invented and that ever will be invented to grasp the truths of it. More, more, more: that’s why we and

zebra fish and every other genomic-proteomic-culturomic enterprise *develop*. We become, along with everything not-we. Organisms, illnesses, events, politics, ethics, technological development—all of these are matters of excess that happen without our full understanding or control, as the cumulative, emergent effect of a multiplicity of forces. *We* happen our way into a future without our full understanding or control, and that's something for which we should rejoice and be glad.

It's the “inability” of any given present or any given thing to coincide with itself—or to identify fully with its opposite partner, or to fully differentiate itself from its partner—that underwrites the possibility of its becoming something else. The unquiet remains are our promise; the excess that bursts forth geyserlike from every chiasms is our guarantee. No, not our guarantee—our stake.

Because of these excesses, the genomic fissureXlandscape is not something that is going to be *solved*, after which we will all live ethically ever after. The genomic fissureXlandscape is not something that is going to be *controlled*, through a more exact science, a more representative politics, or a more humanistic ethics. The genomic fissureXlandscape is where we live, and like Iceland, it is a harshXbeautiful world. We may not live in Iceland, but we do all live, now, in lavaXland. And even if such a territory is too volatile to be fully solved or controlled, the lavaXland of genomics can be inhabited more or less carefully, more or less thoughtfully, more or less justly, more or less admirably. My hope is that these *chs*, for all their fissuredness and excesses, agglomerate into an ethnographic mapping of some of the main streams flowing through the lavaXlands of genomics today, to be used as a guide that might improve our odds for having more of the *more* and less of the *less*.

That's why the body of this text allegorizes those structures of the body that resonate with particular intensity today: chromosomes/chapters are rendered as a series of undecidable *chs*, which also happen to be chiasma. If the chromosomes—twenty-two autosomes, plus x and sometimes y for those organisms currently called human—are the collective site out of or around which our bodies and their meanings swarm today, then the meanings of this text will be mobilized through the reader's hybridization with the twenty-three *chs* here. Just as genomics is that set of practices and theories that pursues not single genes or their products, but multiple genes, gene products, and interactions among multiple chromosomal loci, so too does this text ask for reading practices that span the *chs*, searching for new patterns and connections, forcing new articulations and crosses. Please, reader: let's be fruitful, and multiply.

Because we're going to need to—because nothing else will suffice for the geneXworld. The intensely experimental explosion of genomic demands multiple sets of affirmativeXcritical practices—literary, historical, ethical, political, and as many crosses as you can breed from them—that are just as experimental.

And just as *quick*, fast, and full of life.