

# **The Complete Kant**

**why truth can never be a lie**

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## PROLOGUE

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said lying was always morally wrong.

So was it mere coincidence or Kantian Kismet that on the 204th anniversary of the great man's death I was traipsing up to Manchester to visit my eldest brother? Well, here are the facts.

Just four days before the 204<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kant's demise I'd believed:

1. My brother was living happily enough with his girlfriend, who was called Di
2. Some years ago Di had been pregnant with my brother's child, but tragically it had been stillborn
3. My brother and Di planned to get married

Then, just three days before the 204<sup>th</sup> commemoration of Kant Is Dead Day, tragedy struck once again:

1. Di had a massive heart attack and died

And the following day it was revealed:

1. Di wasn't actually Di at all. She / he was called David

Remember the dead child? Oh yes:

1. My whole family had grieved
2. So my brother / Di / David produced a Web 2.0 tribute site for their dead daughter / figment of their twisted imaginations

Thoroughly befuddled? Just imagine how I felt.

The following statements I can declare to be 100 per cent true:

1. I am 42 years old
2. Despite my unusual name I was born, and firmly intend to remain, a bloke
3. I'm married to Patti, who's most certainly a woman
4. We have two young sons, Borja (3 ½) and Elkin (18 months)
5. We all live in Madrid. Which I love / loathe in largely equal measures
6. I'm a pretty honest person
7. For the last two years I've been selling corporate websites and annual reports

8. Last month my employers sacked me. Yesterday I received my final pay check
9. My estimated total earnings for next month are £0 (€0)
10. Broadly speaking I think capitalism is bollocks
11. I'm angry / irritable / irked a fair amount of the time. Particularly with my wife. Whose mere *Being* has the capacity to really irk / irritate / anger me.

Over of the course of my Manchester mini-break I discovered some things about my brother that were pretty disturbing.

One undeniable truth:

1. I've never visited my eldest brother before. Any time, any place, anywhere.

Uniquely for us, my brother and I talked, and not just spam. Mum was there as well, and despite the surrealism of the whole episode, on one level it was actually rather a fun family event.

On the bus back from his GP, after he'd admitted his own contemplation of transsexuality, my brother turned to me and said: "I'm going to be all right, aren't I?" My brother was frightened, that was the truth of it. He was petrified, I could feel it. I knew it.

That's a truth like no other. And there could be no definitive answer. But I said: "Yes, I think you are, mate." Because bizarrely enough I did feel he'd be all right.

One truth I certainly didn't realise until last week:

1. I love my eldest brother

Two truths I didn't realise until just now:

1. I've always had the sense that my life is moving towards some sort higher truth
2. It's not going particularly well

So let's return to Kant to see if he can help at all. According to a chap called Tim C. Mazur (He came up first in a Google search of "Immanuel Kant, lying", so he surely knows more about the Mighty K than anyone else).

"Kant argued that all persons are born with an 'intrinsic worth' that he called human dignity. This dignity derives from the fact that humans are uniquely rational agents, capable of freely making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their conduct by reason. To be human, said Kant, is to have the rational power of free choice; to be ethical, he continued, is to respect that power in oneself and others.

"Lies are morally wrong, then, for two reasons. First, lying corrupts the most important quality of my being human: my ability to make free, rational choices. Each lie I tell contradicts the part of me that gives me moral worth. Second, my lies rob others of their freedom to choose rationally. When my lie leads people to decide other than they would had they known the truth, I have harmed their human dignity and autonomy. Kant believed that to value ourselves and others as ends instead of means, we have perfect duties (i.e., no exceptions) to avoid damaging, interfering with, or misusing the ability to make free decisions; in other words - no lying."

If like me you skipped over large chunks of that, I think what Kant says is that by lying we become less of a person ourselves as well as denying others their own humanity.

My most public lies:

1. My first marriage. When I basically declared my undying love for someone I ended up leaving after a couple of years. Was I lying? Not on a conscious level, but on a subconscious level? Absolutely aeons of post rationalisation would contend that the False Post Recently Deceased False Father Really Really False Me was lying to the Once Again True (Yet Regrettably False) once divorced from my False First Wife True (Yet Regrettably False) Me.
2. I am a white, male, middle class, Jew. For almost a year I was *Auntie Yvonne, Black Britain's Best Agony Aunt*. Not only was I clearly not a 45-year-old black single mother of two living in Brixton, it's highly likely there were better black agony aunts out there.

I'm by no means a compulsive fibber, but during my less than stellar corporate website / annual report selling career I tried to sell a lot of websites to Hedge Funds guys.

Now what was I supposed to do when some Hedge Fund guy explained Hedge Fundies no longer wearing jeans represented a fundamental moral shift in the whole alternative investment space?

1. Nod earnestly and mutter "yes, yes, you're so right"
2. Smile unconvincingly
3. Tell him I really don't give a rat's arse either way

Of course I lied to him. Was I wrong? Was I denying him his humanity?

Obvious next question:

1. Does this Hedge Fundie have any humanity to be denied?

Lying just gets easier, once you open the door there seems little point in shutting it. Thinking about it, I suppose I do lie a little, but just a wholly acceptable number of tiddlers. As well as the usual “honestly cariño, your bum doesn’t look big in that” sort of fib, I often tend to tell people what I think they’d like to hear, rather than what I really think. Do I lie to be liked? To be nice? Because it’s convenient?

Does that make me a better person? A worse person?

Now my first wife was truthful at all times. But her truth was clouded by her love of goats and hatred of almost every man, woman, and small child on the planet. Including me. An example? Returning home from the pub one night I discovered a *Ten Things I Hate About You* note left oh-so casually on the kitchen table.

One of her less than salient points:

1. You drink too much

And of course at times I have drunk too much. For long periods of time. But that really isn’t the point.

One further truth I’ve only just discovered:

1. I make the assumption (in a largely non-freakish sort of way, I think) I have some sort of inbuilt truth detector

Now when the Kant question comes up it's (quite) often said: "Imagine it's 1939, and you're hiding some Jews in your cellar. A Nazi comes to the door and asks if you're hiding any Jews. Should you lie to the Nazi?"

By telling the truth the Jews will almost certainly die. So what's preferable, not denying some storm trooper's humanity or saving a group of innocent Jews?

What's more worthwhile, the humanity of some Hedge Fundie or that my kids continue to eat? Or that I maintain my 30 a day smoking habit? Or that we take a well deserved family holiday? Because honestly few people deserve a holiday more than we do.

But then am I qualified to decide? Probably not, according to Immanuel (was there a Mrs Kant, I wonder? If so was he equally duplicitous about the size of her buttocks?).

I feel lost, not just because of the stuff with my brother. To be perfectly honest I've felt lost for a while. A good while. Patti says I'm a depressed person, perhaps she's right. I don't know. There's always a cause for my depression, my sadness, but then there always has. It creeps up on me, and then wham! Everything becomes false. My world is transformed into one big fat hairy lie.

I know I'm not great at emotion. I like to be in control, of myself, of my environment. I like to know. To have solutions. When I'm working towards an answer, I'm happy. I'm happy in my marriage, I'm deliriously happy with fatherhood, but we're skint. We're pretty much always skint. Yeah, yeah, I know it's the life I chose. If I hadn't sold my flat we'd be sitting on a pile. But I did, and we're not.

Sure I'm not emotionally inert, not any more. I was. Oh no, perhaps I still am. I'm trying to be emotional as I write. But it's hard. The words don't want to come out. Make them come out. Make them.

Okay, okay, I admit it. I'm a 42 year-old ex corporate website / annual report salesman and I'm well and truly pissed off with the world. I'm lost. I'm utterly and totally lost. And I really need some answers.

So sod it.

One new truth I've learnt:

1. I don't think I do know the Truth

So I'll make this pledge. As my MacBook is my witness, I will try and spend 12 months without telling a single lie. Perhaps this will help. Because I just don't know what I am anymore. What to believe. What's right. What's good. What's truth.

So let's just see if Immanuel was right after all. Because thus far I've hardly been living the Kantian dream.

And there's still a bloody great Nazi hammering at my door.

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