

How to lie to God: Kant's Thomistic turn

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Abstract

For most of his career, Kant accepts Augustine's requirement that lying requires an intention to deceive. However, he eventually converts to Aquinas, following him in rejecting this requirement in favor of Aristotle's teleological conception of lying. This change of view amounts to an improvement, for it makes room for the possibility of lying to an omniscient being—and such lies, we argue, are indeed possible. We accompany these historical and philosophical theses with a biographical thesis taking the form of the following story. Kant believed that in his youth he had lied to God, largely because of his religious training. He adopted policies designed to help him resist the habit of lying to God. However, this program conflicted with his desire to lead a well-rounded life as a public intellectual. This worldly ambition led him to forego the Quaker solution to the problem of lying to God: refuse to swear any oath to God, avoid set prayers and hymns, decline offers of intercession by clergy. Kant's worldly compromise served him well, but as he entered his twilight years, he came to worry that his only surviving argument for theism—the moral argument—might constitute a relapse into the vice of lying to God.

1 | INTRODUCTION

If, as Augustine (1952) supposed, lying requires intending to deceive, one cannot lie to a being whom one regards as *omniscient*. But such lies *are* possible. Therefore, lying does not require an intention to deceive. This reasoning led Kant to follow Aquinas in rejecting Augustine's famous requirement on lying. That is our first historical thesis.¹

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Our second is that in departing from Augustine Kant was led to embrace an even earlier conception of lying, namely, the teleological conception of Aristotle. According to this conception, the speech organ is designed to communicate belief; and lying “perverts” this “natural” function because it diverts the speech organ from its proper goal, namely, telling the truth by the speaker’s lights.²

Our philosophical thesis is that Kant is *right* to think that lying to God is possible. We argue for this thesis by describing a range of contexts in which lying to God would seem—to the innocent eye (or ear), so to speak—to be actual.

Our biographical thesis is that Kant believed that in his youth he had lied to God. His lying had begun when he was a child. Encouraged by compulsory school prayers, it became a daily routine, one abandoned only after graduation. Kant structured his life by adopting policies designed to help him resist the habit of lying to God. However, this program conflicted with his desire to lead a well-rounded life as a public intellectual. This worldly ambition led him to forego the Quaker solution to the problem of lying to God: refuse to swear any oath to God, avoid set prayers and hymns, decline offers of intercession by clergy. Kant’s worldly compromise served him well, but as he entered his twilight years, became concerned that his only surviving argument for theism—the moral argument—might constitute a relapse into the vice of lying to God.

2 | HOW SEEKERS OF TRUTH MULTIPLY LIES TO GOD

Lying is more aversive when addressed to someone whom the liar regards as deserving of respect. Knowing this, those attempting to extract honest testimony from witnesses urge theists to redirect their assertions to God. In this way, the witness’s theism is leveraged to produce more reliable testimony. If theists under oath were no longer perceived to be especially honest in their testimony, their theism would no longer be exploited, and they would come to address fewer lies to God. Ironically, then, the special repugnance of insincerely addressing God works to increase its frequency.

Kant was well placed to observe lies to God in the form of insincerely sung hymns. In May 1784, he moved into a new house located within earshot of a prison. By July, he was writing to the police superintendent to complain about the “stentorian singing of prayers by the hypocritical inmates of the jail” (10: 391). To show the jailor they were God fearing, Kant claimed, inmates “yelled” prayers “with all their might” (*ibid.*). Offended, one suspects, as much by the perceived hypocrisy as by the racket, Kant petitioned the superintendent to quiet them down.

Less rambunctious lies to God could creep into Kant’s home in the form of insincere pre-prandial prayers. Aware of the risk, Kant took precautions. No sooner had one of his dinner guests begun to organize a saying of grace, he would sabotage proceedings by interrupting and telling the guests to please sit down (Kuehn, 2001, p. 325). Some of Kant’s students who became pastors were dismayed by his suppression of prayer. His biographer Ludwig Borowski laments: “I wish that prayer to God would not have seemed to him a fetishizing and unworthy act” (Borowski, 1804, p. 199).

Kant correctly perceived that the danger of lying to God began early and ended only after one’s final dying plea for Mercy. The child begins to lie aloud to God when compelled to pray. At church, he can join a choir of liars when singing hymns. At confession, he insincerely denies some sins and “confesses” to other sins he doesn’t really think he committed. At confirmation, he will affirm some articles of faith that he does not believe—often simply because he does not understand them. If required to hide his religion from persecutors, he may commit defensive blasphemies. When called as a witness, he will be pressured to swear to God that his testimony is true.

The gauntlet thus run has an extra lap for those who join the clergy. For now, there is the further danger that one will suborn others into lying to God. A bishop may even find himself suborning lower-ranked suborners.

As a student of theology, Kant was aware of these dangers. Arnulf Zweig, an editor of his correspondence, reports that Kant kept his vow never to enter a church after completing his religious training (Kant, 1999, p. 7). But Kant’s horror of lying to God put a decisive end neither to his praying nor to his affirmations of articles of faith. He

stood ready to give sworn legal testimony. Moreover, as we shall see, his sole basis for theism—namely to keep up morale for being moral—bears an uncanny resemblance to the “inner lies” he attributes to those who undertake Pascal's wager.

3 | LEVERAGING THEISM

If Frederick the Great knows that Kant believes that God exists, then the King can exploit Kant's theism to predict and control Kant's actions. For instance, Frederick might require Kant to promise God that he will be an especially diligent assistant librarian at the Royal Castle Library in Königsberg. As Frederick knows, as reluctant as Kant might be to lie to the King, he would be even more reluctant to lie to the King of Kings!

Kant does not base his theism on prudential grounds. Nevertheless, he can still use it to boost his income. When a brief letter Kant had sent to Frederick failed to secure the post of assistant librarian, he wrote a longer one to his minister of finance, *Freiher von Fuerst*, explaining that although the librarian's salary was modest, it would still “do much to alleviate my present meager and insecure livelihood as a lecturer at the Academy. I, therefore, hope and pray you will support my application for the position of assistant librarian.” (October 29, 1765). In praying openly, Kant is leveraging his own theism. For praying—or even just mentioning that one is praying—signals piety; and piety is instrumentally valued (as a sign of honesty and good character) even among the impious. If talented actors are assumed rare, the piety-signaling of a believer is likely to be more convincing than that of a nonbeliever putting on a show. Therefore, Kant in our example would be leveraging his theism rather than merely the appearance thereof.

Morality can also be leveraged. The testimony of someone known to believe that lying is always wrong is treated as more reliable than that of someone more tolerant of mendacity. Although people do not base their morality on prudence, they sometimes leverage their morality for prudential purposes.

Kant is no exception.³ He often promised others that he would complete literary projects. Each promise created an obligation that elevated the likelihood of the promise being kept. Morality was thus pressed into service for the sake of advancing Kant's literary career.

Katherine Hawley observes that there is “perhaps something distasteful or trivializing about turning what is intrinsically an ethically neutral matter into something which has moral weight” (Hawley, 2020, p. 290). If so, then perhaps there is even something *immoral* about it. In Kantian terms, one would be treating the Moral Law itself as a mere means, and thus not according to the requisite respect if one were to use it in the way we have described. At any rate, if there is something morally wrong with using morality instrumentally, then some kinds of promises to perform permissible actions will be immoral and they will have that status despite being undertaken sincerely and competently.

Although Kant did not keep all his literary promises, his general performance in this regard was outstanding. Between 1781 and 1788, he published a major book almost every year, and he did so despite having to teach an average of three-and-one-half courses per semester. This flood of publications was jeopardized by the death of Frederick the Great in 1786. The king's successor, Friedrich Wilhelm II, enforced an onerous regime of censorship. Kant now had to circumvent a growing and emboldened bureaucracy bent on rolling back the Enlightenment. In this, he was resourceful. When one of his essays failed to get past the theological censors at Berlin (Kuehn, 2001, p. 364–365). Kant responded by sneaking the banned theological essay into a *philosophy* book, namely, *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793). Kant had been granted the right to submit the book either to a theology faculty of his choosing or to a more lenient philosophy faculty. Preferring to be censored by philosophers, but not wanting to embroil his colleagues at Königsberg, he chose to be censored by the philosophy faculty at Jena. The book with its smuggled theology met the philosophers' more lenient standards (Laursen, 2015). However, the contraband was soon discovered, and Kant's subterfuge was received as bad faith by the new King and his ministers. Insulted, the King threatened through his Justice Minister (and head of the proto-Orwellian “Office of Worship”), Johann Christoph von Wöllner, to punish Kant for any further writing on religion (Letter to Kant of October 1, 1794).

Kant protested—as it happens, disingenuously (Pasternack, 2015)—that his book made “no appraisal of Christianity.” But he also sought to assure the King that he would cease publishing on religion. The assurance took the form of an explicit, written promise. To enhance the credibility of his promise, Kant claimed that God had been monitoring his sincerity.

My conscience is clear: I have never let the divine judge in myself out of my sight, in writing my works on religion, and I have endeavored voluntarily to retract not only every error that might destroy a good soul but even every possibly offensive expression. I have done this especially because, in my 71st year, the thought necessarily arises that I may soon have to give an accounting of myself before a judge of the world who knows men's hearts.

(11: 529–530)

4 | HEARERS, ADDRESSEES, AND RATIFIED RECIPIENTS

A witness backstops testimony. If you consent to playing the role of witness, your silence makes you complicit in any lie the speaker tells which you know to be a lie.

Addressees need not exist. Children address letters to Santa Claus. When Socrates prays “Dear Pan,...” (Phaedrus 279b8-c3) he addresses Pan, not Omoikane (the Shinto God of wisdom); and neither does he address a yet-to-be-conceptualized god. Kant himself envisages a case of lying to a “merely ideal person” (MM 6: 429). If a hostess sends an invitation addressed to “Wohlgeborner Herr Professor und Hochwohlgeborne Frau Kant,” Kant has been addressed despite the nonexistence of his wife. The hostess has also addressed the nonexistent minor noble, Frau Kant. The invitation concerns her in precisely the way that “Vulcan affects Mercury” concerns both Mercury and Vulcan. If Kant receives an invitation solely addressed to Frau Kant, then the invitation concerns her, not him.

Goffman (1981) complicates the notion of the “hearer” of a speech act. He distinguishes between (1) addressees; (2) ratified recipients; (3) intended recipients; and (4) recipients in general (whether known or unknown). The speaker takes responsibility for the utterance's effects only on addressees and ratified recipients. Discovering that your letters to your spouse are being read by a spy may lead you to compose a letter for the purpose of deceiving the spy. The ratified recipient of your deceptive assertions is your spouse but the spy is an intended, unratified recipient. If the deceptive assertion is a lie, then it is a lie only to your spouse.

Kant's short employment-seeking letter had been addressed to Frederick the Great. But Kant, like any job seeker, knew that the King's courtiers would read the letters sent to the King and that these ratified recipients would compose jointly written replies on behalf of the King. Kant therefore had to make his letters intelligible to the King's subordinates. Unratified recipients, such as the thieves who stole Kant's letters, are not owed a similar duty of care (Kant, 1999, p. 112).

In professional contexts, the distinction between ratified and unratified recipients can become institutionalized. Professor Kant is obliged to adapt his lectures to his paying students. If one of them is blind, he must narrate what is written on the blackboard. There is a breach of trust if a professor misleads students through speech that is negligent, reckless, or dishonest. Professor Kant does not owe this deference to strangers loitering outside the classroom window. On the other hand, if a lecturer gives a lying reply to a student who asked a question, the lecturer also lies to the other paying students—unaddressed ratified recipients.

Friends are expected to warn friends of deception. One of Kant's favorite disciples, Christian Kiesewetter, went on to become a friend who would do Kant favors such as sending him books—as well as Kant's beloved Teltow carrots. As the censorship system expanded to include surveillance, Kiesewetter—now offering private lectures in Berlin—alerted Kant to the possibility that Wöllner was getting spies to enroll as students: “People have warned me,” Kiesewetter said,

to be careful about my lectures, for there are eavesdroppers to record anything one might say against religion; I have been told to remind people casually that the Kantian philosophy is not opposed to Christianity. I acted on that suggestion in my first lecture on the *Critique of Practical Reason* and emphasized throughout the lecture the agreement of the formal law with the teachings of Christianity. There was actually a young man present who transcribed every word I said, attracting everyone's attention by his industriously nervous behavior; and he never came again.

(December 15, 1789, *Correspondence* [11: 113])

The notetaker had paid tuition and so was ratified as a paying student. However, Kieswetter had not ratified the participation of spies.⁴ Kieswetter's description of the student as an "eavesdropper" suggests that participation under false pretenses nullifies one's status as a ratified recipient.

Goffman's distinction between addressees, ratified recipients, and unratified recipients explains why a belief in God's omnipresence and omniscience would not render lying *per se* sufficient for lying to God. For the Almighty is usually an *unratified* recipient for the liar. When the liar swears *before* God, however, the Almighty becomes a ratified recipient, and when he swears *to* God He becomes an addressee. (Recall that it is only addressees and ratified recipients that can be lied to.) Swearing before God and *to* God are additional components of audience design, not the default.

To generalize beyond the supernatural, people who are aware they are speaking under surveillance are not thereby speaking to the eavesdropper. When they do choose to address the surveillance team, they are widening the range of people who can be lied to.

Ranges can also be narrowed. An Amish father who shuns his daughter (while still wishing to communicate with her) might get into the habit of addressing to his wife remarks that he would previously have addressed to his daughter. These remarks are intended for his daughter, who, let's imagine, stands within earshot of the couple. She is an intended recipient in Goffman's sense, but she is neither an addressee nor a ratified recipient. Having no more standing in the conversation than an eavesdropper, the daughter is merely an unratified, albeit intended, recipient. If the father lies to his wife with the intention of deceiving his daughter, he has not lied to his daughter.

Some shun God. If the father is bitter about being compelled to shun his daughter, he may refuse to talk to God as well. But the talkative father may still direct complaints to God by addressing his horse. If the (otherwise devout) father takes to slandering God in these remarks, then he is lying to his horse but not to God.

Lying to animals is in fact not so rare, and has at times even been institutionalized. In 15th-century France, for example, locusts, grasshoppers, and other vermin were put on public trial for damaging crops (Leeson, 2017, Chap. 7). The point of the trial was to demonstrate the efficacy of ecclesiastical sanctions at a time when faith in them, having begun to be eroded by heretical teachings, was on the wane. The "demonstration" worked by subterfuge. By stringing out the trials, the authorities could wait until the animals left of their own accord, and then claim that they had left out of fear of the impending ecclesiastical sanctions.

At the start of proceedings, the animals were required to appear before the ecclesiastical court. The necessary summonses were posted as notices on trees. The only readers of these notices were mere ratified recipients, and yet the summonses were addressed to the animals. The animals were threatened with excommunication if they did not leave the fields. Since there was no real sense in which the animals could be excommunicated, the threats were empty: they were lying threats. And since no one in authority believed the summonses could be efficacious, the summonses themselves were equally mendacious.

Although no animal was deceived, many were lied to. Aquinas has a theory of lying that would explain this. In his view, the evil of lying lies in the *addressing*, not in the affect upon the *addressee*. He follows Aristotle in maintaining that lying is a perverted use of the speech organ. "[A]s words are naturally signs of intellectual acts, it is unnatural and undue for anyone to signify by words something that is not in his mind" (Aquinas, 1972, qu. 110, art. 3).

5 | KANT'S THOMISTIC TURN

Although Kant begins his career firmly in the Augustinian camp, by the *Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy* of 1791 he begins to show an occasional openness to Aquinas (8: 267; hereafter “*Theodicy*”). By the *Metaphysics of Morals* of 1797, his position becomes unstable. At some points he suggests that lying requires the intention to deceive, but at others he says things that imply the absence of such a requirement. One such passage, which loudly echoes Aquinas, is the following:

to announce one's thoughts to someone through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks on the subject is an end that is directly opposed to the natural purposiveness of the speaker's capacity to announce his thoughts, and is thus a renunciation by the speaker of his personality.

(MM 6: 429)

Kant doesn't explicitly say that he takes renouncing one's personality to be wrong, but we can safely infer that he thinks so from his equating the morally counter-purposive with “evil proper (sin)” in the *Theodicy* (1791, 8: 256).

The reason why pursuing an end contrary to the natural purposiveness of a capacity is, for Kant, to renounce one's personality is because it involves using one's capacities merely as so many means to non-natural ends (compare Kant's talk of one who uses himself merely as a means as surrendering or throwing away his personality at MM 6: 425). Insofar as one treats one's capacities this way one treats oneself not as a person but as a mere “thing” (G 4: 429). If, as seems likely, renouncing one's personality is the same thing as infringing upon the dignity of one's humanity, then the Thomistic story can be recognized as a corollary of the formula of humanity. Pursuing any end contrary to a capacity's natural purposiveness is morally wrong for Kant because it involves using that capacity merely as a means. A sin of the tongue was described by medieval authors as

a perversion of the will, comparable to pride or gluttony.... the tongue was a physical organ likely to fall into sin without realizing: just as the appetites must be kept in check, the only means to [preserving the] virtue of the tongue was to mount a vigilant guard against sinful speech. The monastic discipline of silence was frequently offered as a cure for dishonest talk.

(Corran, 2018, p. 4)

Transposing to Kant, lying for him is akin to (though not exactly of a kind with) a violation of one's “duty to oneself as an animal being” (MM 6: 421). Its closest cousin would be masturbation. Disgust, shame, and embarrassment are, in Kant's view, apt because the “self-abuser” violates a duty to himself as an animal being. Masturbation involves “formal” self-mutilation: depriving oneself temporarily not of organic *parts* (“material” self-mutilation), but of the natural use of one's powers (MM 6: 421). More specifically, masturbation, for Kant involves the misdirection of one's “sexual attribute” away from its natural purpose of preserving the species (MM 6: 424–425) and toward the end of generating animal pleasure. Voluntary self-castration (a case of *material* self-mutilation) sacrifices this same natural capacity for the purpose, in some cases, of making a living as a male soprano (MM 6: 423). Kant supposes that each of these cases, some naturally bestowed capacity or endowment is either surrendered or diverted from its natural end. It is used (or disposed of) either counter-purposively or even just unpurposively (6: 425).

It is plausible that Kant would view such alleged “perversions” as involving a violation of one's humanity. After all, humanity *in the round* plausibly includes one's animal capacities along with one's intellectual capacity for setting one's ends.⁵ And Kant argues that masturbation is wrong (“a violation of a duty to oneself”) precisely because it involves one's depriving oneself of “all respect for oneself,” and also of all respect for “humanity in one's own person” (6: 425). Since animals lack the power of intelligent speech, Kant cannot treat lying as a violation of a duty one bears to oneself qua animal being. But it is otherwise similar to a violation of such a duty.

These reflections suggest that Kant's turn away from Augustine and toward Aquinas harmonized with a turn away from the formula of universal law and toward the formula of humanity in accounting for the impermissibility of lying. Kant incorporates an Aristotelian account of the wrongness of lying within his own moral theory by treating lying as an abuse of one of those capacities that are jointly constitutive of one's personality.

6 | DIVINE WITNESSING

Given that lying to a superior is bad, lying to God is worse: indeed, it's as bad as lying can be. In Acts 4:35, Ananias fails to declare that his donation to the apostles is only part of the proceeds from his land sale. Peter admits that Ananias lied to no man. But Peter insists Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. Ananias dies on the spot! Three hours later, his wife Sapphira arrives without any awareness of her husband's death. Peter asks her the price of the land. Sapphira insincerely confirms a false price to Peter, thereby lying to both a man and to God. She too drops dead.

Ambrose of Milan (1896, Chap. IX, pp. 56–58) takes Peter to be reasoning as follows: *Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. Therefore, Ananias lied to God.* The second premise commits Peter to one half of the doctrine of the Trinity. The remaining half would be secured if someone lied to Jesus and was struck as dead as Ananias and Sapphira. Curiously, the closest any human being comes to lying to Jesus is the woman at the well. When thirsty Jesus tells the Samaritan to summon her husband, she denies having a husband. But Jesus knows she is living with a man: “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” (John 4.17–4.18) The woman lives to draw the lesson that Jesus is a prophet.

Given Christian belief in God's readiness to smite the mendacious, those wishing their testimony to be believed gain a resource. They can begin with the formula “As God is my witness.” If they survive the utterance, the testifier thus draws attention to the lack of post-declaration smiting. If the testifier is known to be a theist, then the addressee has reason to raise the credibility of the testimony they have just heard. The magnitude of the enhancement will depend on the degree of the testifier's belief in punitive divine intervention. When after several centuries such belief fades away, the now-impotent formula, “As God is my witness,” may survive as a trace of past practice.

Similar evidential clout can be gained by swearing an oath in which one invites God to strike one down if one is lying.⁶ Such oaths were often sworn on cleaved animals with the suggestion that God is invited to smite one in a similarly gory manner if one breaks one's oath. Here, what is typically enhanced is the credibility that the promise will be kept, not that it is sincere, though in some cases both enhancements might occur.

No theist can rationally regard lying to God as in their long-term interest. But people are short-sighted. They may lie to God because they irrationally discount the lie's bad consequences, which will occur in the distant future. Concern about the myopia of a testifier is lessened if the testifier is known to believe he is close to death. It thus made sense for Kant to enhance his credibility by highlighting his advanced age. At the extreme of discernibly myopia-proof testimony lies death-bed testimony, which accordingly is the most persuasive of all. A man of faith who goes to the gallows swearing he is innocent deprives the hangman of sound sleep.

Many judicial inquiries were settled by swearing. Those who were judged to have falsely sworn were banned from swearing again. This served as a powerful incentive to truthfulness for, once stripped of the right to swear an oath, a person would be disarmed against future hostile litigation.⁷ Even those who could swear truthfully had an incentive not to swear if there was a high risk of being mistakenly judged a perjurer.

An oath could be oversworn—and so evidentially outweighed—by the oath of someone of superior social rank. When competing oaths were sworn by those of equal rank, one party could break the tie by recruiting others to swear in corroboration of their oath. (Others could also swear in corroboration of the oath taker's character and reliability. But this “oath-helping” was distinguished—sometimes not all that sharply—from “witnessing.”)

John Locke saw the atheist's inability to sincerely swear to God as rendering them incapable of testifying reliably. Open atheists were even more legally exposed than Christians who piously refused to swear under pressure of

verses such as “But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King” (Matthew 5:34). In the *Religion*, Kant cites this verse approvingly (6:160—and see fn. 76) and could also have invoked James 5:12: “Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.”

When these verses failed to persuade a judge, one Quaker litigant offered to swear if the judge could cite a single case of swearing either by Jesus himself or his Apostles. The judge admitted he could not. Nevertheless, the judge ruled against the Quaker. The incident illustrates that a Quaker had the option to change his mind and start swearing. In contrast, known atheists had trouble persuading others that they had genuinely converted to theism.

Secret atheists do swear to God. According to Locke, they mistakenly believe that the addressee does not exist. The atheists are responsible for their oath to God despite their insincerity. From Locke’s perspective, the secret atheist resembles the writer of a cheque who complacently promises a large payment to a payee whom they take to be nonexistent. When the cheque is unexpectedly cashed, the cheque-writer is not entitled to a refund.

As Locke realized, swearing to God enhances the credibility of testimony by harnessing *belief* in God. Even atheists recognize that *belief* in God is the cause of the improved reliability. Openly atheistic police invite pious suspects to address their testimony to God rather than themselves. The atheists are content to listen in. Even in some secular trials, witnesses are expected to swear to God that their testimony is true.

As Britain expanded its empire, there was pressure to allow non-Christians to swear oaths. The case of *Omychund v Barker* (1744) made it possible for polytheists to swear. Being atheists, Buddhists were not covered. But their belief in punitive reincarnations could still be unofficially leveraged.

7 | CURSING

Consider the curse scene in the opera *Rigoletto* (McCawley, 1999, p. 597). Everyone in the opera house is called upon to cry “*Sia maledetto!*” (“May he be cursed!”). Since the unknown malefactor is in the audience, he must either call upon God to curse him or be revealed by his silence. An atheist could thus leverage the malefactor’s theism to either discover the malefactor’s identity or to inflict upon him the psychological torment of having called down upon himself a divine curse.

In a similar spirit, a testifier might request that God curse him—or damn his soul eternally—if he is lying. This could be a tiebreaker in the credibility stakes if the competing party had also sworn to God in the absence of the supplementary request. To keep the struggle alive, the competing party would have to match his opponent curse for curse. To prevail, the testifier might conditionally curse a member of his own family.

Kant enlists self-cursing to oppose religious arrogance and intolerance. “The same man who has the audacity to say, Whomever does not have faith in this or that historical doctrine as a precious truth, *that man is damned*, would of course also have to be able to say, If what I am here telling you is not true, *then let me damned!*” (6:190, fn. 344).

Cursing invokes God’s active adjudication and punitive follow through. But whether God does in fact follow through might be difficult to discern. Might God intervene more visibly?

8 | TRIAL BY ORDEAL

The economic historian Leeson (2012) argues that, as strange as it may seem, the medieval trial by ordeal was a broadly reliable way of ascertaining guilt or innocence. Officially, the method works by divine intervention. Priests require the accused to perform a feat that would, in the absence of a miracle, cause immediate and grave injury. For instance, in the trial by “hot water” one undergoing the trial (the so-called “proband”) might be required to retrieve a gem from a cauldron of boiling water. In the trial by “hot iron,” they would be required to carry a red-hot iron bar for three paces or to walk over red-hot plough shares. Historically, most who agreed to the ordeal emerged unscathed.

Leeson reasons that in the years when faith in such trials held firm, by and large, only those who believed themselves innocent would choose the trial. The guilty would confess or settle out of court. The fact that an individual had volunteered for the test thus had evidential value. And among the innocent, there would be volunteers aplenty given the strength of medieval belief in God and the congregation's lack of skepticism about the official account of how the trial works.

For this same reason, as soon as a congregant had volunteered, the Priest would have excellent reason to believe them innocent. At this point, there would have been an opportunity to rig the test so that the innocent proband emerged unscathed. Leeson suggests that this was in fact what happened.⁸ Boiling water would be replaced by tepid water, room-temperature iron bars would be surreptitiously substituted for ones recently displayed as red hot. The proband experiencing the water as tepid would believe that the miracle had already started working. However, to preserve the credibility of the test some probands would have to be seen to fail, so on a minority of occasions the test would not be rigged.

The priests rigging the trial lied in the presence of God and perhaps, depending on what they said, even to God. The ordeal was administered after days of religious preparation in a sacred space, such as a church. The proband was reminded of their articles of faith. Belief in those articles was strengthened. The priest would pray:

O holy water... I adjure thee by the living God that thou shalt show thyself pure... to make manifest and reveal and bring to naught all falsehood, and to make manifest and bring light to all truth; so that he who shall place his hand in thee, if his cause be just and true, shall receive no hurt; but if he be perjured, let his hand be burned with fire.

(Lea, 1973, p. 34)

Assume the priest is rigging the trial. Then he is in reality issuing only a *sham* adjuration (i.e., a sham command). And a sham adjuration is no more an adjuration than a fake diamond is a diamond. The priest's utterance—"I (hereby) adjure thee"—in fact tokens two distinct types of speech act: on the one hand, a sham adjuration (the performance) and, on the other, a false description of this performance as an adjuration. Since the priest knows he is not really adjuring, the latter—the descriptive statement—is a lie. He lies to *the water* (the addressee), but also to God (a ratified recipient).

Doctrinal shifts in the 13th century led to the demise of the trial by ordeal. Increasingly, weight was given to scriptural prohibitions against commanding God to perform miracles: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Deut: 6:16, Matthew 4:7).⁹ In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council officially prohibited priests from participating. Nonetheless, the clergy continued to be pressured by the secular authorities to administer this useful test. Chafing under the pressure, Pope Innocent III complained: "Although canon law does not admit ordeal by hot iron, cold water and the like, unhappy priests are being compelled [by the secular authorities] to pronounce the blessing and become involved in such proofs and are being fined by the secular officials if they refuse" (Bartlett, 1986, p. 98). Within a couple decades, however, the loss of clerical support led all of Europe to abandon trial by ordeal.

9 | LYING BY PRAYING

Rulers who believe that theism increases honesty have an incentive to persuade people to believe that God exists. Since the young are the easiest to persuade, indoctrination starts early.

Early prayers are taught by one's parents. A mother clasps her child's hands together and recites. She has the child memorize prayers and say them out loud. Since the content is not of the child's choosing, the child can easily wind up praying insincerely. Children soon notice the difficulty of opting out of prayers on grounds of dissent. Often, they do not even understand. Sometimes, their parents are equally clueless. Yet the baffled parents still compel their

children to recite the Nicene Creed. Children must still sing the hymn *Oh come, all ye faithful (Adeste Fideles)*, whose second verse runs:

God of God, light of light,
Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Very God, begotten, not created:
O come, let us adore Him, (3×)
Christ the Lord.

Few children in the congregation have a clue about why He “abhors not” (as reasonable as this might sound), nor do they know why God is “Very” (Very what?), nor again do they usually know what it means to say he is “begotten not created.” And yet the singer blasts out the rousing hymn as if its sentiments were transparently worthy of endorsement. Insincerity of this kind might well have been one element in Kant's painful memories of his boyhood school, the Collegium Fridericanum. Forced prayers were part of this religion of “ingratiation.”

As an adult, Kant avoided insincere prayer by steering clear of prayer-procuring situations. Even when church attendance was professionally required, he would duck out, claiming to be “indisposed.” Kant may have been influenced by the following contrary-to-duty imperative: *Do not lie but if you do, then lie to a human being rather than to God!* When discussing politeness (25: 931) and programming dinner parties, Kant seems to presuppose that some lies are less wrong than others: “One who loves the illusion of the good eventually is won over to actually loving the good. One loves those people who are always polite to others, e.g. a good-natured citizen that lies to bring about good (although this is not exactly worthy of love)” (25: 931). As a host of dinner parties, Kant served wine that could lead to tipsy lies. He encouraged lively conversation that raised the risk of lies told from runaway imagination (7: 180). Throughout the evening, he lowered inhibitions with his rule that what was said at a dinner party was not to be repeated after the dinner party. Toward the end of the evening ruffled feathers were to be smoothed back into place with a parting phase of conversation devoted to witty banter and jokes.

Officially, however, Kant's absolute prohibition on lying equalizes all lies. Treating oath-breaking as especially bad, he says, “almost sanctions the common lie” (6: 159fn).¹⁰ All lies are at the ceiling of wrongness. Utilitarianism, by contrast, precludes any ceiling on how wrong a lie can be. For each lie, a worse lie is possible.

Prayer, according to Kant, is often dishonest. “Specific prayers are unbelieving prayers, for I am asking under a condition, and do not believe that it will quite certainly be heard, since otherwise I would not pray with a condition attached.” (*Lectures on Ethics*, 27: 325). Presumably, the condition in question is something like the one figuring in the formula: “God, if it please you, then grant me such and such.” When I pray with this conditioned attached, I manifest my lack of full belief that the prayer will be “heard” (i.e., granted) because I show that I'm not sure that my request harmonizes with God's purposes. The conditional prayer is “unbelieving” because it manifests a lack of confidence in divine providence: one acts as if one is not fully certain that God knows what is good for us.

If one's fortune improves immediately after one's prayer, one should not conclude that God amended his previous plan in one's favor. Such a turn of events might even alarm us “since I could not know whether I might not have called down misfortune upon myself” (ibid).

Objectively, in Kant's view, prayer is superfluous. Subjectively, prayer is needed because of human weakness. Man, Kant says, is “a helpless and incapable creature, who is beset with ignorance of his future destiny, so that he cannot be blamed for making specific requests, for example, [when] in peril at sea.” (27: 326). To forestall dishonesty, prayer should be delayed until children can understand what they are praying for. Since one's earliest prayers must be said out loud, there is a danger that the child will interpret the unusual speech as a magical spell or as courtly flattery. A child's penchant for fetishism and anthropomorphism should not be triggered by having them pray to Jesus. Better to have children pray to God-the-Father.

Kant holds that the child must be warned that prayers are not themselves services to God. Prayers, when done properly, aid the moral self-improvement that leads to moral conduct. As one matures, the need for a prayer declines. Praying out loud is replaced by silent prayer. Silent prayer in turn gives way to meditative self-examination.

10 | LYING BY OVER-CONFESSING

Drama-hungry teenagers are warned not to make false confessions. Confessing a sin that one doesn't view as a sin is lying to God. Nonetheless, Medieval guides on confession advise Christians to err on the side of claiming to have engaged in wrong-doing, lest they leave some sins unconfessed (Corran, 2018, p. 121). Consider a penitent who has paid someone to refrain from taking a religious office. Simony is the sin of paying to *secure* a religious office. Should the penitent confess to simony despite regarding his payment as at most a borderline case of simony? On the one hand, receiving absolution would spare him the consequences of his sin in the afterlife. On the other, the insincerity of the confession might invalidate the forgiveness—and perhaps itself constitute a sin.

Is it permissible for one to lie out of humility? Henry of Ghent answers no: all lying is forbidden. Yet he assures the would-be confessor that no harm is done if the penitent's deed was not actually sinful (Quodlibet III, q. 25, fo. 83v.). Henry quotes Gregory the Great, Ep. 65 (PL, col. 522) to the effect that “good minds think they are sinning when there is no sin” (Corran, 2018, p. 121). Those who are doubtful approximate this humility. The danger of sinning has put the penitent in fear. And according to Henry, what is said out of fear is not said assertively.

But what about Peter's assertion that he did not know Jesus? In all four gospel accounts of the arrest of Jesus, Peter is depicted as being frightened into denying that he knew Jesus. When Peter repents, he repents for lying. The repentance is reported as accurate.

Over-confession also arises in law. Informants secure immunity from prosecution only for those crimes to which they confess. The more the informant confesses, the less chance the cross-examiner has of catching the informant in a lie about not committing a crime. What should the informant do about borderline cases of crimes? Erring on the side of confessing secures immunity for borderline cases in the event that they are really crimes.

Atheists over-confessed during Stalin's purges. They wanted to accumulate as much protection and leniency as they could muster from their confession. Or at least they wanted to remove a motive for any torture.

11 | LEVERAGING PRUDENCE

Blaise Pascal realizes that the libertine cannot bring himself to believe that God exists merely by reflecting that doing so is prudent. Although being offered a prize for believing that Kant loved sausages does provide one with a reason to believe it, by itself it induces no belief. For belief aims at truth. To win the prize, therefore, one searches Kant's culinary correspondence for supporting evidence. Alternatively, one seeks conditions that trigger belief in the way that strong light triggers tanning. For instance, Pascal notes that belief is infectious. He recommends the libertine acquire belief by participating in religious practices. Belief will catch up with action.

In the aftermath of this initial self-deception, however, one must come to take one's formerly irrational belief to have matured into a rational belief unblemished by bias. As Kant says,

Now, one cannot possibly think of a reason that would consciously receive direction from any other quarter with respect to its judgments, since the subject would then attribute the determination of his judgment not to his reason but to an impulse. Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences.

(GW 4: 448)

This explains the peculiarity of saying “I believe *p* because such-and-such biases me toward believing that *p*.” Kant objected that Pascal's recommendation involves lying to God:

Someone tells an inner lie, for example, if he professes belief in a future judge of the world, although he really finds no such belief within himself but persuades himself that it could do no harm and might

even be useful to profess in his thoughts to one who scrutinizes hearts a belief in such a judge, in order to win his favor in case he should exist.

(MM 6: 430)

Here, Kant is treating God as the envisaged addressee and not merely as the ratified recipient. The profession is made to God not merely *before* him. That the envisaged scrutinizer of hearts is thought of as God is clear from the fact that Kant tells us that this same scrutinizer must be thought of under the aspect of *imposer of all obligations*. Kant's idea is that we must regard our duties *as if* they were this being's commands (MM 6: 439). In seeing us as addressing God, however, Kant is not presupposing that God exists. He is clear that the addressee may turn out to be merely "an ideal person that reason creates for itself" (MM 6: 438).

Kant also mentions cases of "pretending," or falsely professing, conviction "before God" where he does not explicitly say that the profession is made to God (see 8: 266–267; 8: 421). Claiming that in these cases the profession is made to oneself but *before* God, Kant explicitly characterizes such professions as lies (8: 268–269). Since the being before whom one lies is nevertheless a "reader of hearts" such lies are "most absurd" (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, they remain lies even though the teller of them could not hope by their means to deceive God.¹¹ We claim that a statement made—whether out loud or in one's inner voice—*before* God, but without being addressed to God, is still a lie to God. For in this case God is a ratified recipient, even if not an addressee, and lies made before ratified recipients are lies told to those recipients.

One lies to God when one engages in professions of belief addressed to God as part of the process of inducing in oneself that very belief. And yet Kant still approves of silent agnostic prayer so long as it is conceived of as a standing unvoiced wish "to please God in all our doings and non-doings" (6: 195, and see note). He thinks, in addition, that uncertainty about whether God exists is compatible with addressing God in words, though he does not approve of spoken agnostic prayer, a form he characterizes as less perfectly sincere than the silent kind (*ibid.*).

In the *Dialectic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues there are no possible *theoretical* proofs of God's existence (and equally none of his nonexistence). To fill the gap, he adopts a position that would later be associated with William James. Whereas Kierkegaard (1843), in his anti-Kantian defense of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, contends that the Christian must believe contrary to the evidence and even contrary to morality, James and Kant deny that one may believe contrary to the evidence. Instead, they hold that one is justified in sometimes believing beyond the evidence. However, James seems to assume that the evidential gap is temporary. Belief that your new employee is trustworthy nurtures and sustains trustworthiness—which can later be manifested in deeds. Had you not relied upon him, you would have lost the opportunity to acquire evidence bearing on his trustworthiness. Whereas W. K. Clifford requires evidence to precede belief, James permits evidence to be acquired after the belief (Williams & Saunders, 2018, pp. 1274–1275). Instead of running away from the evidence, James sees himself as running toward the evidence.

Kant regards theoretical uncertainty about God's existence as irremediable. Believing that God exists will never create theoretical grounds that could serve as evidence for this very belief. Yet suspending belief in God is morally forbidden. Morality, after all, is psychologically available only if one believes (in the sense of "*Glaube*"), first, that there is a perfectly just afterlife and, second, that perfect justice requires that God exists so as to be able to proportion happiness to virtue (worthiness to be happy). Thus, morality leads to faith.

Salvation requires morality and morality requires more than the belief that God might exist or even that God probably exists. One must believe that God does exist. Thus, Kant comes uncomfortably close to Blaise Pascal in his Wager. Kant dislikes the Wager because he pictures Pascal as basing belief on prudential reasons. By contrast, Kant admires the evidence-based argument from design (or in his phrase "the physico-theological argument"), which starts from the assumption of the appearance that the natural world is intelligently designed (A 826-7/B 854-5). This argument, Kant thinks is capable of stabilizing a "doctrinal belief" in a very wise and great author of the world (*ibid.*). By contrast, Pascal's prudential argument is crass—and Kant does not deign to engage seriously with it.

Kant does not seem to notice that Pascal is restricting the Wager to his libertine friends. Pascal is arguing that, from their prudential perspective, they ought to cultivate theism. After they succeed, the ex-libertines will share Pascal's disgust with prudential reasons for theism, for they will be alienated from the path by which they arrived at their faith. The prudential argument is thus a ladder one is to throw away.

Pascal himself, never tries to use the reasoning of the Wager to justify his faith, for his own theism is based on a mystical experience. This gives him more distance from his prudential Wager than Kant enjoys from his argument from the psychological availability of morality. Kant claims that he has proved God's existence on moral grounds. This is not a ladder that one can throw away. One attains certainty only by standing on the top rung.

Why does Kant view his moral argument for God as decisive given that he regards Pascal's wager as a somewhat crass failure? Both arguments require cultivating a psychological state (for Kant *Glaube*, for Pascal, opinion) representing God as existing despite the absence of evidence. Both permit the agnostic to go through the motions of prayer so as to foster full belief that God exists. Both deny that further evidence could improve on the certitude afforded by the practical argument that God exists.

If Kant had applied the principle that lying requires the intention to deceive, he could have concluded that it is impossible to lie to God. This would have removed the worry about using prayer, confession, and other practices to instill the belief that God exists. But his allegiance to such a principle was never firm enough to allay the worry about lying to God.

12 | SUMMARY

Lying to God emerges naturally with theism. The credibility-enhancing advantages of leveraging theism override qualms. Atheists should concur, at least on economic grounds, that lying to God is predictable and pervasive, both culturally and historically. Consequently, we also think that 21st century philosophers of language who study lying should reject the Augustinian requirement of an intention to deceive—and that they should do so whatever their theological beliefs.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to the Collins ethics notes (thought to have been delivered in the mid-1770s), the pre-critical Kant follows Augustine (1952) in taking lying to require an intention to deceive (27: 447). Kant never reports having abandoned Augustine, but his characterizations of lying do manifest a drift toward Aquinas. The drift is complete in *On a Supposed Right to Lie* (SRL), where the late-career Kant defines a lie merely as “an intentionally untrue declaration to another” (8: 426). Here, there is no mention of any requirement that the liar must intend to deceive. The same requirement is similarly absent from Kant's characterization of a lie in the ethical sense in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM), a work which appeared 1 month before SRL in August 1797. Nonetheless, the requirement is present at this stage, for it is mentioned in the related discussion at MM 6: 430. The discrepancy in MM between definition and commentary seems likely to be a symptom of a tension. In this work, Kant wishes to retain the requirement of an intention to deceive but his views on the phenomenon of “inner lies” create counter-pressure. He simply cannot see how one can deceive oneself (MM 6: 430): It compounds the tension that Kant is, at this stage, already attracted to Aquinas's picture. For in *On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy*, published some 6 years before Kant encounters the problem about inner lies, he flirts with Aquinas's account of lying (8: 267; 1791).

- ² Skalko (2019, pp. 19–21), a contemporary defender of Thomas Aquinas' perverted faculty argument, compares lying with wearing a condom during sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy. The natural end of assertion is to communicate what one believes to be true. The liar is “superimposing on this action an end contrary to its natural end.” (Skalko, 2019, pp. 166).
- ³ In his surviving corpus of nearly 3 million words, Kant never admits to telling a lie. When Moses Mendelssohn complained of the insincere tone of Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit Seeker*, Kant declares: “Although I am absolutely convinced of many things that I shall never have the courage to say, I shall never say anything I do not believe.” (10:69) Mendelssohn's concerns about Kant's sincerity would have been intensified by Kant's credulous letter to Frauhelein Knobloch (10:46–10–10:48).
- ⁴ Kant reviled spies because he believed that what he called “the infernal art” of espionage works by deception. “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant—Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1795]), § 6; I. Kant, “Metaphysics of Morals,” in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant—Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1797]), §§ 57–58; Montesquieu (1748, II–II–1) refuses spies any role in a constitutional monarchy.
- ⁵ Officially, humanity is the capacity to set ends, hence an intellectual capacity. But because Kant sees human beings as a composite of animal and spiritual natures, it is plausible that honoring one's duties to oneself as an animal being forms a component of respecting one's humanity. (“Humanity” can either mean the sum of those capacities that distinguish us from the non-human animals, or the sum of those capacities that are distinctive of human nature. The latter is what we mean by “humanity in the round.”)
- ⁶ Kant's recognition of this point is clear from the fact that in some places he takes oath taking to be one of the touchstones of the kind of holding-to-be-true that is constitutive of belief (in his technical sense—“*Glaube*” [9: 73]). However, in other places he seems to deny that belief (rather than, say, opinion) is strictly the kind of mental state indicated by readiness to swear (see 6: 305).
- ⁷ A contemporary analogue is estoppel (literally: “stuffing the mouth”). After a mother claims one man is the father, she loses the right to claim that a second man is the father. There is deadline for a man to contest a mother's assertion that he is the father. Many conflicts are adjudicated by silencing a litigant and allowing the other's claims to prevail by default.
- ⁸ Leeson supports his suggestion only with indirect considerations such as the longevity of the practice. But more direct evidence can be gleaned from the high pass rates in cases where the probands had already confessed and were considered absolved. Bartlett relates that one chronicler writing in the year 1183 reported that “in the town of Ypres twelve men were submitted to the ordeal of hot iron, but by the virtue of confession all were delivered safely” (Bartlett, 1986, pp. 79–80). Bartlett does not say why the proband would have needed to undergo the trial if he had already confessed his guilt. But one supposes that test might have been used to check for full contrition.
- ⁹ It may be the priest's awareness of this prohibition that causes him to address his command to the water when he really means to invoke God's power of miraculous intervention. Of course, the congregation knows that God is being called upon to perform a miracle, but the wording renders the clash with scripture less stark.
- ¹⁰ In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant denies that you lie when telling defensive falsehoods to a liar or a ruffian. For they should not expect you to tell what is true. This loophole is closed if you specify that what you say as true (LE, 227, 229). Repeating your falsehoods under oath is worse because your sworn statements are lies, while the original statements were not lies.
- ¹¹ Although the professor of faith cannot intend to deceive God, they can intend to do something that entails deceiving God, for (as Kant's example makes clear) they can intend to win His favor by means of such a profession. And they could only win God's favor by such a means if they were (*per impossibile*) to deceive Him. But this does not mean that Kant is envisaging a case in which, in his opinion, someone intends to deceive God, for intention (*de dicto*) is not closed under entailment. A mathematically untalented boy heads off to the market intending (*de dicto*) to buy two apples. Buying two apples entails buying a prime number of apples. But the lad does not intend (*de dicto*) to buy a prime number of apples.

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