

Is morality a human invention?

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To answer this question, there are a few questions that we must tend to; namely, the definitions of morality, to “invent,” and the methodology by which I will be attempting to respond to the question. Firstly, “morality”. Such a term, not to be muddled with ethics, can be deployed in at least three distinct ways, of which I will outline below, and any argument about its origin must decide which sense is at stake. Firstly, the descriptive: Anthropologists and sociologists use morality to label whatever code of conduct a group actually endorses. This sense is relativistic by design: Viking honor, Jain non-violence, and contemporary human-rights talk all count as moralities, however inconsistent. Because it merely catalogues practices, it cannot by itself ground the authority or truth of those practices. Next, evolutionary biologists and some psychologists equate morality with traits that solve cooperation problems (e.g., reciprocity, fairness). Here, “moral” just means “fitness-enhancing social technology.” Although useful for explanatory science, this definition assumes—rather than evaluates—natural selection’s goals, and it blurs the line between prudence, etiquette, and morality proper. Finally, some may define morality as the system of norms that all rational agents would endorse under impartial conditions. Joshua Gert’s formulation—morality as an informal public system knowable and acceptable to every rational person—captures this idea. It treats moral demands as categorically authoritative (no opting out) without presupposing whether that authority is objective fact or human projection.<sup>1</sup> I will be adopting the third, normative definition of morality, as, unlike the others, it does not imply realism or the contrary. Rather, the public-system model is agnostic: both camps can explain why rational agents would endorse the code, but differ on whether the endorsement tracks independent truths. Thus, I frame the debate around the normative public-system definition, as I believe it best clarifies our fault line in the question.

In this essay, I use “invent” as follows: a norm is invented when its existence and authority depend on human choice, such that without those contingent choices the norm would not have arisen and would carry no binding force.<sup>2</sup> An invented morality is one whose validity is grounded solely in knowing subscription; if everyone withdrew endorsement, the obligation

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Gert and Bernard Gert, “The Definition of Morality,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, January 28, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Invent | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary.” Cambridge Dictionary. Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/invent>.

would disappear. By contrast, a discovered morality would remain authoritative even in the absence of belief or adoption. Thus, we can examine the question of the dispute over moral realism, as the anti-realists would say morality is invented in this sense, while realists insist it is discovered.

Within the five camps of metaethics Huemer outlined in *Ethical Intuitionism*, I choose to examine the arguments that intuitionism and nihilism put forward.<sup>3</sup> While naturalism, the other group moral realists fall into, is likely the more popular one, G.E. Moore's open question argument is sufficiently compelling to disregard naturalism for an essay of this length.<sup>4</sup> Nihilism, in contrast, is most mentioned in common discourse and seems to be a more direct skeptic of moral facts than skepticism and non-cognitivism. Moreover, nihilism already embeds an evolutionary–sociological debunking story that many lay readers find compelling (“morality is a convenient fiction”), making it the most intuitively powerful rival and the cleanest stress-test for any realist argument.<sup>5</sup>

The verdict on invention versus discovery turns partly on five background facts about the world. (1) Determinism: if every brain state is fixed by prior physics, “inventing” morality may reduce to passively reporting neural outputs, dulling the realist claim that we recognise independent norms.<sup>6</sup> (2) Materialism: if only physical properties exist, any non-natural moral property must supervene on the material world or be dismissed. (3) Theism: a universe with God allows morality to pre-date humanity; a godless one forces the explanatory burden onto human convention or emergent natural facts. (4) Human convergence: robust cross-cultural agreement on basic prohibitions (e.g., unprovoked killing) supports the notion of discovery, whereas deep, persistent disagreement favours invention. (5) Innate moral cognition: findings that preverbal infants expect fairness or recoil from harm suggest built-in, possibly truth-tracking, moral structures; the absence of such evidence would point the other way.<sup>7</sup> I pit Intuitionism (irreducible, stance-independent moral truths knowable by rational intuition) against Nihilism

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Fred Feldman. “The Open Question Argument: What It Isn’t, and What It Is.” *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005): 22–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749829>.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Skepticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 1, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-moral/>.

<sup>6</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “determinism.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 7, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/determinism>.

<sup>7</sup> Regina A. Rini, “Morality and Cognitive Science,” *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/m-cog-sc/>.

(all moral discourse is uniformly false) and ask which hypothesis offers the tighter, more economical explanation of these five data-points.

### (1) Determinism

Under the Humean view embraced by moral nihilists, every voluntary action is the direct product of an agent's strongest present desire.<sup>8</sup> If someone lies, it is simply because the urge to deceive outweighed any contrary inclination; there is no deeper "ought" at work. On this model, so-called weakness of will—acting against one's own better judgment—cannot even occur. The desire that prevails defines "better" in practice, so the very idea of judging one course right yet following another is ruled out in advance.

Ethical intuitionists think this is far too thin an account. As Kaspar argues, their rationalist psychology assigns moral judgments a special motivational status: they function as reasons, not just as rival appetites. Because normative recognition engages a distinct kind of motivation, it is perfectly coherent for an agent to believe that lying is wrong, feel a genuine pull from that belief, yet still capitulate to fear or self-interest. When the agent later feels remorse, we understand the conflict: the moral reason never disappeared; it was merely overridden.<sup>9</sup>

This richer structure better matches ordinary experience. People routinely battle temptation, resent their own lapses, and describe themselves as having chosen poorly, even though the stronger urge won out at the moment. Intuitionism can honor that phenomenology while still accepting a causally ordered universe: the judgment "lying is wrong" exerts force precisely because it presents itself as a normative fact—a claim about what one ought to do, rather than just another impulse. Sometimes that rational force prevails; sometimes it does not. Either way, we can make sense of akrasia and moral struggle. Nihilism, by tying all action to the single metric of desire-strength, has to deny the phenomenon entirely, leaving an explanatory hole where our lived moral psychology belongs.

### (2) Materialism

Error theorists argue that their monism—the view that reality contains only natural, non-normative facts—rescues naturalism from "queer" moral properties that allegedly defy

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<sup>8</sup> Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*

<sup>9</sup> David Kaspar, "Intuitionism and Nihilism," *Philosophia* 46, no. 2 (2018): 319–336.

scientific explanation. They lean on J. L. Mackie's famous argument from queerness, which claims that objective values would be so metaphysically and epistemically strange that disbelief is the safer bet.<sup>10</sup> Yet even Jonas Olson, a leading error theorist, concedes that three of Mackie's four queerness points cannot withstand close inspection; the lone remaining point simply assumes that irreducibly normative relations are impossible, rather than proving it.<sup>11</sup> Intuitionists answer that this is a false dilemma. One can accept every empirical result in physics, chemistry, and neuroscience and still hold that moral value is a distinctive, *sui generis* feature of the world—no more exotic than consciousness, mathematical objects, or modal truths, none of which reduce neatly to particle physics either. W. D. Ross already cautioned that moral qualities form a “very special kind” of fact, without committing to any Platonic realm.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary intuitionists such as Robert Audi go further: endorsing objective value does not require a full-blown non-naturalism; it merely requires rejecting reductionism about the normative.<sup>13</sup> This thus puts the spotlight back on parsimony. A simpler ontology is a virtue only if it still explains what needs explaining. Once we factor in everyday moral experience—remorse, obligation, and deliberative conflict—the error theorist's savings begin to look like a false economy: a budget cut that balances the books by ignoring half the expenditures. Ontological thrift is admirable, but not at the cost of explanatory bankruptcy.

### (3) Theism

Both theories reject Divine Command Theory, but for opposite reasons. Intuitionism argues that God's commands must be *good* because of independent moral facts; otherwise, “God is good” reduces to “God obeys his own commands,” an empty tautology.<sup>14</sup> Nihilism removes the circularity by jettisoning morality altogether: if there are no moral facts, there is nothing for God to ground. Yet this “solution” is bought at the cost of obliterating the very normative standards used to critique Divine Command Theory in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Intuitionism, therefore, offers a

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<sup>10</sup> Huemer, Ethical Intuitionism.

<sup>11</sup> Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Huemer, Ethical Intuitionism.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Stratton-Lake, “Intuitionism in Ethics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Reppert, “The Emptiness Objection,” *The Emptiness Objection*, September 20, 2009, <https://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2009/09/emptiness-objection.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael W. Austin, “Divine Command Theory,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 16, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>.

more stable middle path: the moral law neither floats free of reasons nor collapses into divine fiat.

#### (4) Human Convergence

Error theorists point to deep moral disagreement as proof that our ethical judgments are mere projections.<sup>16</sup> Yet persistent disagreement also exists in objective disciplines such as physics and history, and no one concludes that electrons or past events are therefore unreal. Intuitionists accept that cultures diverge on many surface-level rules, but they stress a durable consensus on core norms—e.g., prohibitions on wanton killing, lying, and promise-breaking.<sup>17</sup> Where people do clash, the cause is usually factual error, cultural bias, or faulty reasoning, just as in the sciences. Nihilists now face a mirror problem: if morality is nothing but an adaptive fiction, why do societies independently converge on condemning gratuitous violence and valuing honesty? Evolutionary stories about reciprocal altruism can explain that convergence, but they are equally compatible with the idea that these practices track genuine moral goods. Intuitionism, therefore, matches nihilism's parsimony while giving a tighter fit to the evidence.

#### (5) Innate Moral Cognition

Sharon Street argues that natural selection engineered our moral intuitions for survival value, not truth-tracking.<sup>18</sup> If that is correct, we allegedly lose any epistemic warrant for trusting conscience. Yet the same line of reasoning, applied consistently, would also erode confidence in mathematics, inductive inference, and every other cognitive faculty that emerged through evolution. However, it is also true that if we can still justifiably rely on arithmetic and scientific reasoning despite their evolutionary origins, we can likewise rely on at least some moral judgments. Empirical evidence supports this symmetry: when researchers strip away framing effects and misinformation, many moral intuitions—such as the wrongness of unprovoked killing or the fairness of equal pay for equal work—remain both stable and widely shared. Intuitionism, therefore, models conscience after vision: fallible, sometimes distorted, but generally reliable

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<sup>16</sup> Folke Tersman, "Moral Disagreement," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 8, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disagreement-moral/>.

<sup>17</sup> Stratton-Lake, "Intuitionism in Ethics," SEP.

<sup>18</sup> Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–166.

once obvious defeaters are removed. Nihilism, by contrast, must dismiss the entire body of moral experience as systematically delusional—an extreme skepticism few are willing to accept.

#### (6) On the “queerness” objection

Mackie’s famous argument from queerness claims that objective values would be so metaphysically peculiar that we should doubt their existence. But, as Kaspar notes, the move is self-defeating: calling moral facts “queer” already presupposes their putative features, conceding at least a hypothetical ontology.<sup>19</sup> If “they are too strange” really just means “we do not yet understand them,” that is intellectual humility, not a proof of non-existence. Worse, error theorists still rely on classical logic while insisting that both “Abortion is wrong” and “Abortion is not wrong” are false, a stance that collapses into contradiction under ordinary bivalent semantics. Intuitionists avoid such semantic gymnastics; they keep ordinary moral language intact and simply add that some of its claims are true. In the end, the queerness objection functions less like an argument and more like a shrug—what Kaspar calls “a tautology delivered with a frown.”<sup>20</sup>

Across determinism, ontology, practical authority, agreement, and cognitive science, intuitionism repeatedly does the double work of (i) accommodating our considered moral experience and (ii) meeting explanatory standards familiar from other realist inquiries. Nihilism scores occasional victories in parsimony but only by *stipulatively* dismissing the very data intuitionism explains. On balance, the rationalist still has the stronger hand: its account may be metaphysically richer, but it earns that richness by illuminating phenomena the error theorist can address only with silence or semantic surgery.

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<sup>19</sup> Kaspar, “Intuitionism and Nihilism.”

<sup>20</sup> Kaspar, “Intuitionism and Nihilism.”