

The meanings of the words in (B) depend on conventions, as is the case with all statements. But no other conventions are relevant to the truth of (B). We cannot render (B) false by changing any conventions, without changing the meaning of (B). The same is true of all logical principles. The laws of logic are thus examples of non-conventional, objective facts that are known independently of experience.

That will have to do for an overview of some of the difficulties for empiricism. Others have dealt with this issue more thoroughly and conclusively. But this should suffice to make clear why Mackie is not entitled to take empiricism for granted as a premise from which to attack intuitionism.

5.5 The implausibility of nihilism: a Moorean argument

Nihilism holds that nothing is good, bad, right, or wrong. I have said enough to show why we are *prima facie* justified in rejecting this. A nihilist might accept this point but maintain that there are nevertheless strong arguments for nihilism that overcome the initial presumption against it.³³ In the last section we saw some objections a nihilist might raise against realism, and we will see others in later chapters. What I argue in this section is that the presumption against nihilism is very strong, so that the arguments for nihilism would have to be extremely powerful to justify the nihilist's position.

So far, I have focused on the qualitative point that many moral beliefs have *prima facie* justification. But justification comes in degrees: my justification for thinking that China exists is stronger than my justification for thinking that the theory of evolution is true, which is stronger than my justification for thinking that tomorrow will be sunny. What determines the *degree* to which an intuitive belief is *prima facie* justified? If one accepts Phenomenal Conservatism, the natural view to take is that the more obvious something seems, the stronger is its *prima facie* justification. Very clear and firm intuitions should take precedence over weak or wavering intuitions.

Now consider in outline one of the arguments for nihilism:

1. Moral good and bad, if they exist, would be intrinsically motivating—that is, things that any rational being would necessarily be motivated to pursue (in the case of good) or avoid (in the case of bad).
2. It is impossible for anything to be intrinsically motivating in that sense.
3. Therefore, good and bad do not exist.³⁴

More needs to be said to properly assess each of those premises, but I won't say it now. Right now I just want to use this argument to illustrate a general epistemological point. Given the nihilist conclusion in (3), one could validly infer such further conclusions as:

4. It is not the case that a nuclear war would be bad.
5. It is never the case that enjoyment is better than excruciating pain.

And so on.

Now, just as someone who accepted (1) and (2) might be moved by the above reasoning to accept (4) and (5), a realist might argue against (1) and (2) as follows:

- 1'. A nuclear war would be bad.
- 2'. Enjoyment is sometimes (if not always) better than excruciating pain.
- 3'. Therefore, good and bad *do* exist.
- 4'. Therefore, either
 - a. Good and bad need not be intrinsically motivating, or
 - b. It is possible for something to be intrinsically motivating.

Some would charge this realist argument with 'begging the question' against nihilism, since premises (1') and (2') are precisely what the nihilist denies in his conclusion. But this embodies a naive conception of the burdens of dialectic, granting a presumption to whichever argument happens to be stated first. For if the realist argument had been stated first, then we could presumably say that the nihilist argument 'begs the question' against the realist since its premises (1) and (2) (conjointly) are precisely what the realist denies in *his* conclusion. The relationship between the two arguments is symmetric: each argument takes as premises the denial of the other argument's conclusion.³⁵ How, then, should we decide between them?

The strength of an argument depends upon how well justified the premises are and how well they support the conclusion. Both of the above arguments support their conclusions equally well—both are deductively valid. So of the two arguments, the better is the one whose premises are more initially plausible. Now which seems more obvious: 'Enjoyment is better than excruciating pain' or 'It is impossible for anything to be intrinsically motivating'? To me, the former seems far more obvious. And I do not think my judgment on this point is idiosyncratic. Therefore, it would be irrational to reject the former proposition on the basis of the latter.³⁶

To justify his position, the nihilist would have to produce premises more plausible than any moral judgment—more plausible than ‘Murder is wrong’, more plausible than ‘Pain is worse than pleasure’, and so on. But some moral judgments are about as plausible as anything is. So the nihilist’s prospects look very bleak from the outset.

Finally, a comment on philosophical method. The nihilist argument above, as well as the empiricist argument discussed earlier (section 5.4, Objection 4), evince a kind of rationalistic methodology common in philosophy. The method is roughly this: begin by laying down as obvious some abstract principle of the form, ‘No *A* can be *B*’. (For example, ‘No substantive knowledge can be *a priori*’; ‘No objective property can be intrinsically motivating’; ‘No unverifiable statement can be meaningful’.) Then use the general principle as a *constraint* in the interpretation of cases: if there should arise cases of *A*’s that for all the world *look like B*’s, argue that they cannot really be *B*’s because that conflicts with the principle, and seek some other interpretation of the cases. One of the great ironies of philosophy is that this rationalistic methodology is commonly employed by *empiricists*. One might have expected them to adopt the opposite approach: start by looking at cases, and only form generalizations that conform to the way all of the cases appear; stand ready to revise any generalizations upon discovery of counter-examples; treat the *cases* as a constraint on the *generalizations*.

My method is something between those two: begin with whatever seems true, both about cases and about general rules. If conflicts arise, resolve them in favor of whichever proposition appears most obvious. Roughly speaking, we want to adopt the coherent belief system that is closest to the appearances, where fidelity to appearances is a matter of how many apparently-true propositions are maintained, with these propositions weighted by their initial degree of plausibility. We can call this the method of reflective equilibrium.^{37,38} The method of reflective equilibrium leads us to endorse some moral judgments. It is highly unlikely that it could ever lead us to endorse nihilism, as the latter requires a rejection of our entire body of moral beliefs. Indeed, it would be hard to devise a theory *less* faithful to the appearances.

5.6 Direct realism and the subjective inversion

I turn to another epistemological objection to intuitionism, which will help clarify intuition’s role in producing knowledge. Consider a pair of statements of the form,