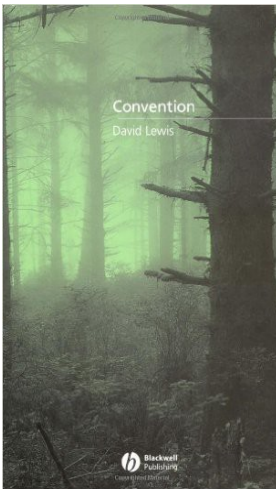


## 2.6 Analysis of conventions



**David Lewis**

*Convention: A Philosophical Study* (1969)

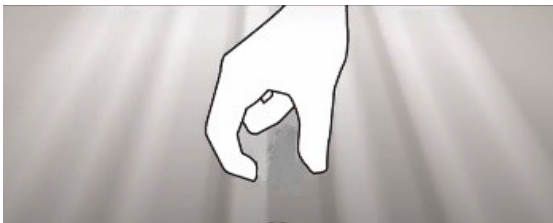
On Lewis's analysis, a convention is a regular but arbitrary solution to a **social coordination problem**. Conventions are patterns whose **maintenance** is more important to us than **improvement** in the pattern. The value of conventions lies in the **stability** of expectations. Any given convention may not be the **best** one, but once in place, we benefit more from conforming to it than deviating from it.

**Here's an example.**

Suppose Prof Hansen teaches a class to a group of students every Wednesday at 4pm. Might there exist a better time and day for the class, given everyone's preferences, abilities and needs? Maybe. But it's worth more to everyone in the class that there exist the stable expectation that everyone will turn up each Wednesday at 4pm because that solves the problem of how to coordinate everyone's actions so that class can go ahead each week.

**We can distinguish between**

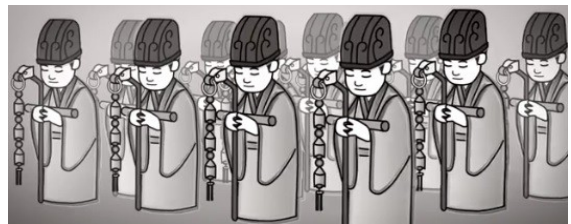
**moralties based on a supernatural God**



A morality based on a supernatural God will understand its moral laws to be the **best** of all possible laws. Since God is **perfectly rational**, his morality will contain no deficiencies, and it is the **intrinsic excellence** of his laws that makes it one's duty to obey them.

and

**convention-based moralities**



A conventional morality openly embraces a **non-perfect coordination strategy**. Duty is based on the legitimate expectations that others have, given the conventions of the society, rather than on the belief the these conventions are uniquely excellent as coordination strategies.

Confucius's convention-based morality combines **nature** and **humanity**: human beings are **naturally convention-following animals**, but the conventions *themselves* are not a natural necessity, but are a matter of **contingent human history**.