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THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

There are two especially important arguments against belief in God.

The first is based on the (alleged) lack of evidence for God's existence, and the rule that one should not believe things without a basis in evidence. We'll turn to that one later in the course.

The second, which is our topic for the next few classes, tries to show that the idea that God is all-powerful and all-good contradicts a very obvious fact about the world: the fact that it contains evil. This is by far the most important argument for atheism.

What do we mean by "evil"?

For our purposes, an evil is just some feature of the world that the world would be (everything else equal) better off without.

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So defined, it seems very plausible that there are many evils, some large and some small. The Holocaust is a massive evil; your roommate being rude to you this morning is a small one.

It seems plausible both that we can recognize that some things are evils in this sense, and that we can sometimes see that one evil is worse than another.

At this point, you might be inclined to object: don't people have different definitions of 'evil' and disagree about what things are evil?

Sure. But notice that you don't have to be able to define something, or resolve every disagreement about something, to recognize some instances of a kind.

At this point, you might be inclined to object: don't people have different definitions of 'evil' and disagree about what things are evil?

Sure. But notice that you don't have to be able to define something, or resolve every disagreement about something, to recognize some instances of a kind.

Consider the kind 'chair.' It is hard to come up with a good definition of this word, and there are some cases where there might be disagreement over whether something is a chair. But that doesn't mean that we can never confidently recognize something to be a chair.

Here is a different objection that people sometimes give to the existence of evil, which might be called the 'sliding scale' objection:

What we call 'evil' is relative. If you took away something which seems bad to us — like the Holocaust — we would just regard other things as more evil, since there would be less bad things. And if we took away everything which we now think of as evil, we would just regard other things, which we now think of as minor annoyances, as evil.

What we call 'evil' is relative. If you took away something which seems bad to us — like the Holocaust — we would just regard other things as more evil, since there would be less bad things. And if we took away <u>everything</u> which we now think of as evil, we would just regard other things, which we now think of as minor annoyances, as evil.

Suppose, for the sake of argument that it is true that if we took away some of things that we regard as evils, we would then be more bothered by other, lesser evils. Does it follow from this that there is no evil in the world, or that the world would not be better if it did not contain the Holocaust?

No. In fact, the idea expressed in this passage seems to presuppose the existence of evils in our sense, rather than pose any sort of problem for the idea.
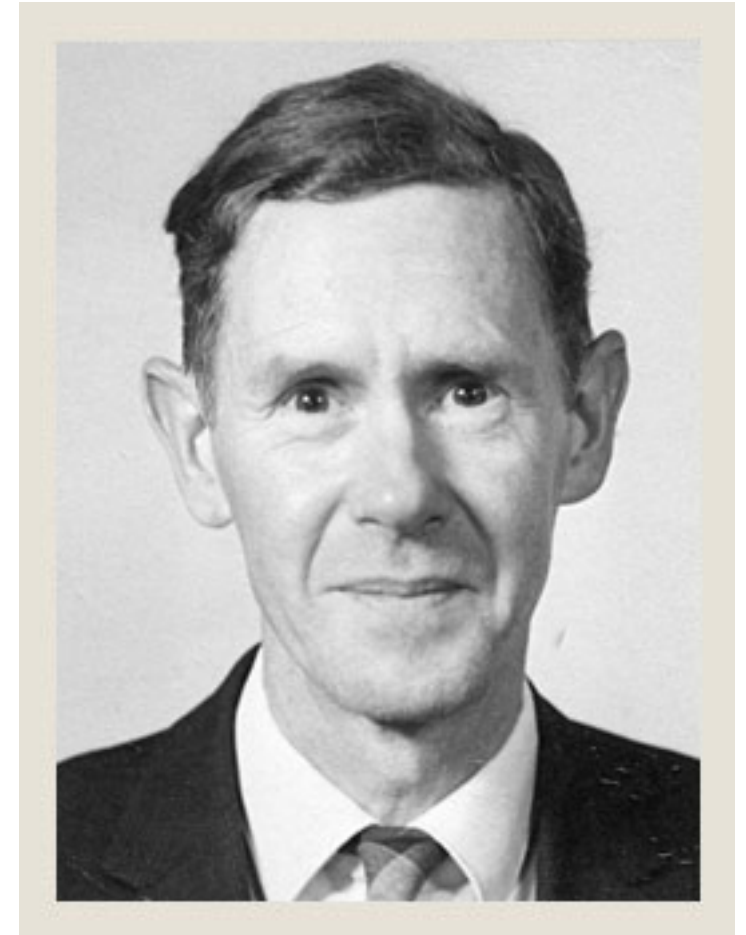
The reading for today is a powerful version of the argument that evil rules out the existence of God, which is due to the Australian 20th century philosopher John Mackie.

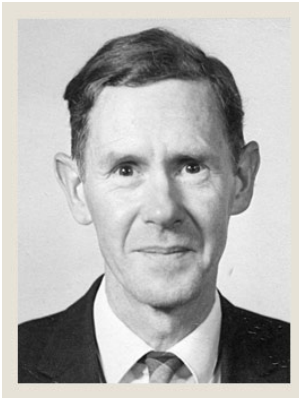The basis of Mackie's argument comes in the following passage:

In its simplest form the problem is this : God is omnipotent ; God is wholly good ; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions : the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.

In its simplest form the problem is this : God is omnipotent ; God is wholly good ; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions : the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.

What we need to understand, first, is why Mackie thinks that these three claims are contradictory. The three claims are:

God is omnipotent.

God is wholly good.

Some evil exists.

Now, it is certainly not obvious that these three claims are contradictory. Mackie thinks that we can show them to be contradictory with the help of two further premises:

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

God is omnipotent.

God is wholly good.

Some evil exists.

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

Now our question is: why does Mackie think that these five claims are contradictory?

To answer this, we can begin by thinking about the claims that God is omnipotent and that God is wholly good. If you think about it, what these claims say can be split into two parts. They first say that God exists and, second, say that if God exists, then God is a certain way.

So we can replace these two claims with the following three:

God is omnipotent.

God is wholly good.

Some evil exists.

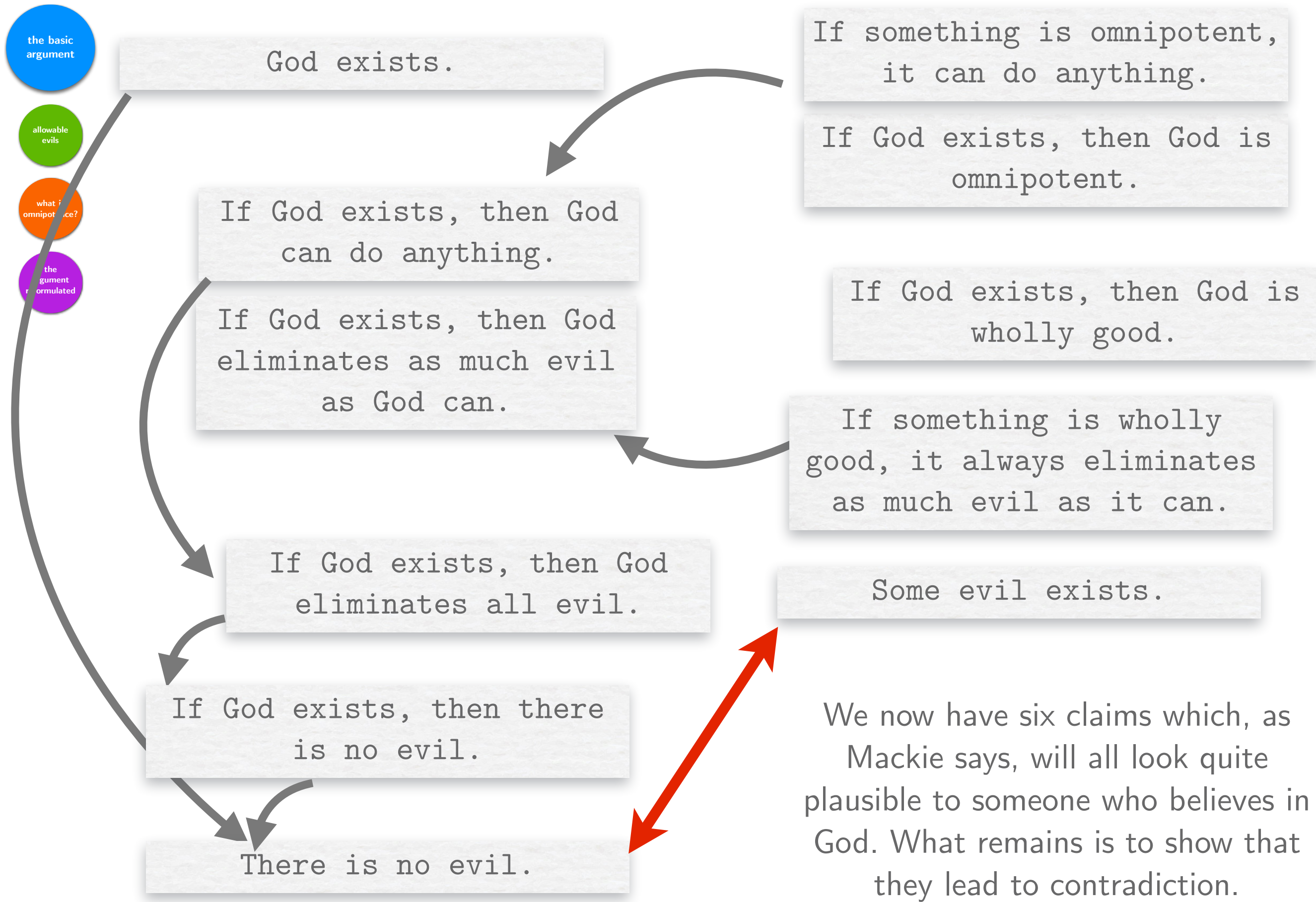If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

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So we can replace these two claims with the following three:

God exists.

If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

If God exists, then God is wholly good.

God exists.

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

If God exists, then God can do anything.

If God exists, then God is wholly good.

If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can.

If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

If God exists, then God eliminates all evil.

Some evil exists.

If God exists, then there is no evil.

We now have six claims which, as Mackie says, will all look quite plausible to someone who believes in God. What remains is to show that they lead to contradiction.

There is no evil.

THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
3. If God exists, then God can do anything. (1,2)
4. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
5. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
6. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (4,5)
7. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (3,6)
8. If God exists, then there is no evil. (7)
9. Some evil exists.

C. God does not exist. (8,9)

We initially presented the argument as reductio ad absurdum - 'reduction to absurdity.' This is a style of argument in which you show that a collection of claims imply an obvious falsehood -- like that there is evil and is not evil -- with the aim of demonstrating that at least one claim in the collection must be false.

But we can also present the argument as, at left, a straightforward argument for the conclusion that God does not exist.

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The argument appears to be valid, so it looks like anyone who believes that God does exist must reject one of the argument's independent premises.

The traditional believer in God cannot reject (1) or (4); and (2) and (9) seem at first glance tough to reject. So attention naturally focuses on premise (5).

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5. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

Can you think of any reason why a person might not eliminate an evil without thereby doing anything wrong?

Let's consider a few examples. Dentists sometimes cause people pain. Are they doing something morally wrong when they do this? Why?

Let's consider a more important example. Do parents ever cause their children pain? Is this ever permissible?

When is it permissible for a person to permit an evil to exist, even when they can eliminate that evil?

5. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

When is it permissible for a person to permit an evil to exist, even when they can eliminate that evil?

It seems that this is permissible just in case the following two conditions are met:

there is some good G which outweighs E

the person cannot bring about G while also eliminating E

5. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

there is some good G which outweighs E

the person cannot bring about G while also eliminating E

Let's say that an evil is **pointless** when these two conditions are not met. That is, an evil is pointless whenever there is either no outweighing good or if the good could have been brought about without the evil.

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> 5. If something is wholly
> good, it always eliminates
> as much evil as it can.

We have seen that there is reason to doubt premise (5) of
Mackie's argument. But the counterexamples to premise (5) we
have considered suggest a way to repair the argument.

Every case in which it seemed like a being could legitimately allow
some evil to exist was one in which the evil was outweighed by some
good which the being could not bring about without the evil. That
suggests that the following claim is plausible:

> 5*. If something is wholly
> good, it always eliminates
> as much pointless evil as
> it can.

Our examples of parents and dentists cast no doubt on (5*).
Indeed, if anything, they support it.

> 5*. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much pointless evil as it can.

Our examples of parents and dentists cast no doubt on (5*). Indeed, if anything, they support it.

Let's see how our argument looks if we simply replace the problematic premise (5) with (5*).

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
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This argument simply replaces (5) with (5*). But this argument is invalid. To fix it, we need to make some changes to the premises which are supposed to follow from (5*).

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This argument simply replaces (5) with (5*). But this argument is invalid. To fix it, we need to make some changes to the premises which are supposed to follow from (5*).

But this is not quite enough; the argument is still invalid, since the conclusion does not follow from (8) and (9).

THE ARGUMENT FROM POINTLESS EVIL

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To fix this, we need to strengthen premise (9).

Let's call this the 'argument from pointless evil.'

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But this is not quite enough; the argument is still invalid, since the conclusion does not follow from (8) and (9).

To fix this, we need to strengthen premise (9).

Let's call this the 'argument from pointless evil.'

Once again the believer in God must find an independent premise to reject; and it looks much harder to reject (5*) than it was to reject (5).

But now it might look more promising to reject (9*).

9*. Some pointless evil exists.

To reject (9*) is to say that for every bit of evil we find in the world, the following two things are true:

there is some good which outweighs the evil

God cannot bring about the good while also eliminating the evil

2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

The problem with this strategy comes from another premise of our argument: (2). For if (2) is true, then God can do anything. So it will **never** be true that God **cannot** bring about some good while also eliminating some evil. If God can do anything, God can always bring about the good without allowing the evil!

9*. Some pointless evil exists.

there is some good which outweighs the evil

God cannot bring about the good while also eliminating the evil

2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

This is a serious problem for the believer in God. In general, as a being becomes more powerful, fewer evils become permissible for that being to allow. Imagine, for instance, that our dentist had new powers — like the power to do root canals while causing no pain. This more powerful dentist would **not** be permitted to allow pain while performing a root canal.

Because God is so powerful, it can be hard to see how any evils could be permissible for God to allow. It looks like any evil would have to be a pointless evil.

9*. Some pointless evil exists.

2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

there is some good which outweighs the evil

God cannot bring about the good while also eliminating the evil

The best move here for someone objecting to Mackie's argument is to say that, contra (2), God cannot do anything. And indeed that is the moral of a very old paradox.

2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

Consider the following question:

Could God create a stone so large that even God could not lift it?

Yes

No

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, lift the stone.

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, make the stone.

Either way, there is something that God cannot do.

2. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

Either way, there is something that God cannot do.

Does this 'paradox of the stone' show that God is not omnipotent?

Many have thought that it does not, and that instead it shows that premise (2) gives the wrong account of omnipotence. On this view, being able to do anything is a contradictory property, because it involves being able to bring about contradictory situations.

One might think, then, that omnipotence does not require being able to bring about contradictory or incoherent situations. Instead, it requires only the ability to bring about any situation which is genuinely possible:

2'. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about any possible situation.

2'. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about any possible situation.

9*. Some pointless evil exists.

Why does the difference between (2) and (2') matter? Remember that we imagined the proponent of Mackie's argument wanting to reject (9*).

Mackie's objection to that move was to say that, since God can do anything, any evil is a pointless evil — since God could always bring about the outweighing good without that evil.

But now we are saying that God can bring about anything possible. And maybe some goods are such that it is impossible for them to exist without the corresponding evil. And, if that is the case, that evil might not be pointless. If every evil is like this, then (9*) is false.

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8. If God exists, then there is no pointless evil. (7)
9*. Some pointless evil exists.

C. God does not exist. (8,9)

2'. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about any possible situation.

Let's now see how our argument looks if we sub in (2') for (2).

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
2'. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about any possible situation.
3. If God exists, then God can bring about any possible situation. (1,2)
4. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
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6. If God exists, then God eliminates as much pointless evil as God can. (4,5)
7. If God exists, then God eliminates all pointless evil that it is possible to eliminate. (3,6)
8. If God exists, then there is no pointless evil that it is possible to eliminate. (7)
9*. Some pointless evil that it is possible to eliminate exists.

C. God does not exist. (8,9)

We've made adjustments to a few of the premises to fit our revised view of omnipotence.

Let's call this the 'argument from pointless evil 2.0'

This argument is complex, but powerful.

We saw that the theist could reject premise (5) of Mackie's original argument; but (5*) is considerably harder to reject.

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9*. Some pointless evil that it is possible to eliminate exists.

C. God does not exist. (8,9)

We saw that the theist could reject premise (5) of Mackie's original argument; but (5*) is considerably harder to reject.

We saw that the theist could reject premise (2) of our first version of the argument from pointless evil; but (2') is considerably harder to reject.

What's the best move for the theist in responding to the argument from pointless evil 2.0?

9*. Some pointless evil that is possible to eliminate exists.

Attention naturally focuses on premise (9*).

What would it take to deny (9*)? If we think that God can bring about any possible situation, if we deny (9*) we must claim that, for any evil we find in the world, there must be some greater good such that it is **impossible** for the good to exist without that evil.

What would it take to deny (9*)? If we think that God can bring about any possible situation, if we deny (9*) we must claim that, for any evil we find in the world, there must be some greater good such that it is **impossible** for the good to exist without that evil.

Keeping this clearly in mind shows that some popular attempts to explain evil fail.

Consider, for example, the view that God permits evil because it leads to greater appreciation of goods. It seems quite implausible that it is impossible to have appreciation without evil.

Or consider the response that God brings good out of every evil, much as a dentist brings the good of dental health out of the pain of dental work. That analogy fails, because it is not impossible to have dental health without the pain.

Next time, we will consider an attempt to do better: the free will defense.