

The argument from evil

Our topic today is the argument from evil. This is by far the most important argument for the conclusion that God does not exist.

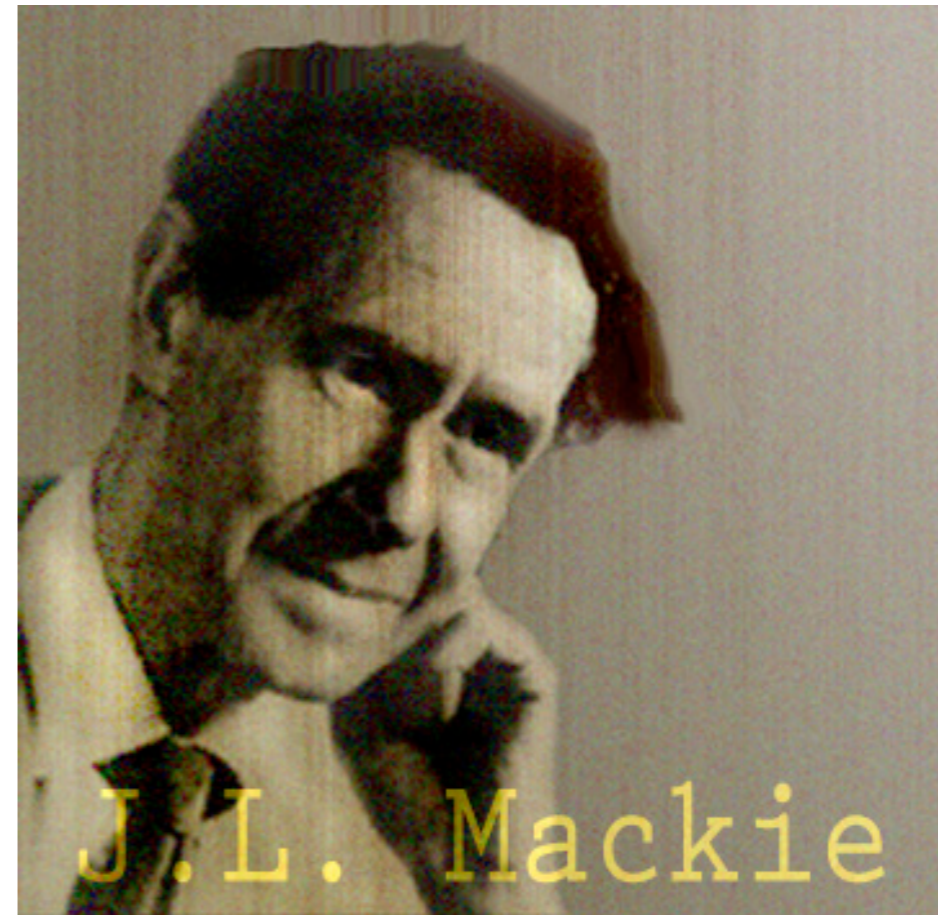
The aim of at least the simplest form of this argument is to show that the existence of evil in the world shows that God does not exist. In this sense, the argument from evil is the opposite of the design argument. That argument tried to pick out a feature of the world which showed the existence of God; this one tries to pick out a feature of the world which shows that God does not exist.

Many philosophers have discussed versions of the argument from evil. The version of the argument that we'll be discussing is from a 1955 article by John Mackie, an Australian philosopher.

Mackie says that his aim is to show

“not only that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.”

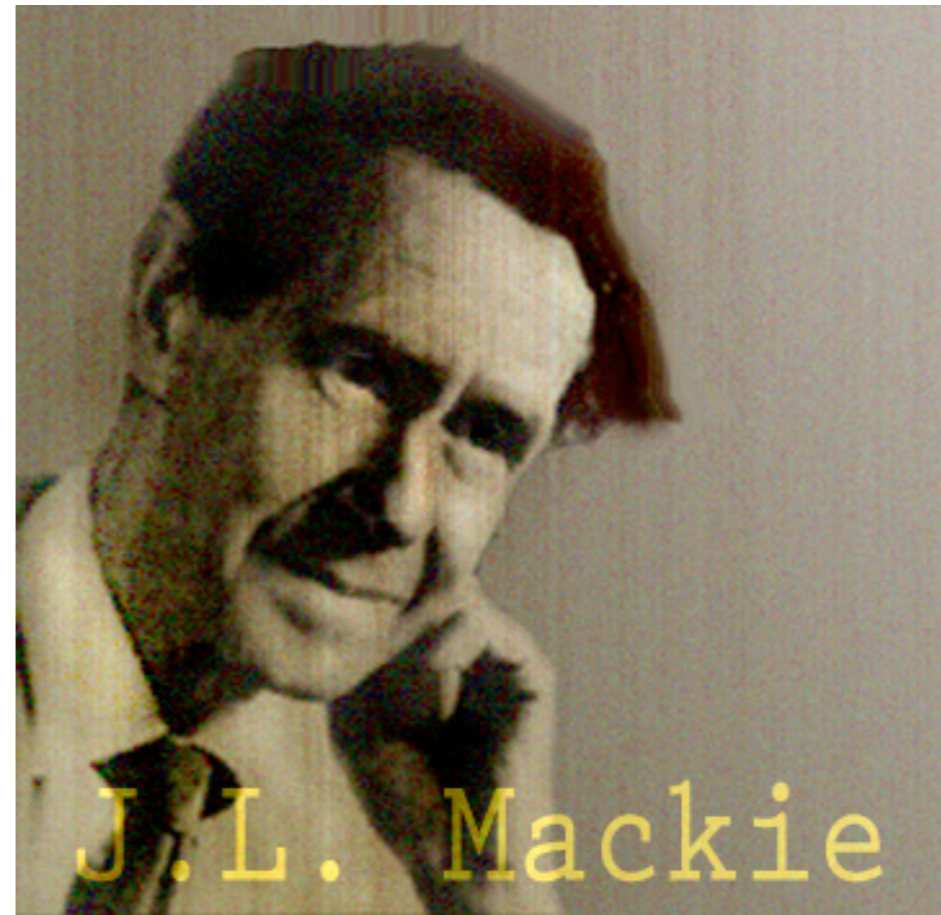
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“not only that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.”



What does “inconsistent” mean here?

But what parts of the ‘essential theological doctrine’ does Mackie think are inconsistent with one another? Here’s how he describes the relevant doctrines:

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.

The first step in understanding Mackie’s argument is seeing why he thinks that these three propositions, or claims, are inconsistent.

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The first step in understanding Mackie's argument is seeing why he thinks that these three propositions, or claims, are inconsistent.

Mackie is claiming that the following three propositions cannot all be true:

God is omnipotent.

God is wholly good.

Some evil exists.

It is certainly not **obvious** that these claims are inconsistent. To show that they are inconsistent, we need to add two further assumptions.

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

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

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What we need to understand is: why does Mackie think that these five claims are inconsistent? That is, why does he think that it is impossible for them all to be true?

God is omnipotent.

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To answer this question, it is useful to think about the first two of these claims, which attribute certain properties to God.

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God is omnipotent.

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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 claims with the following three:

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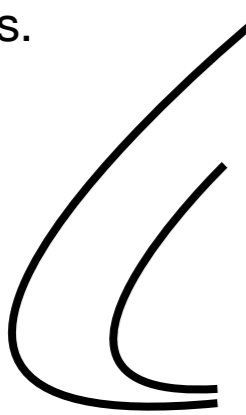
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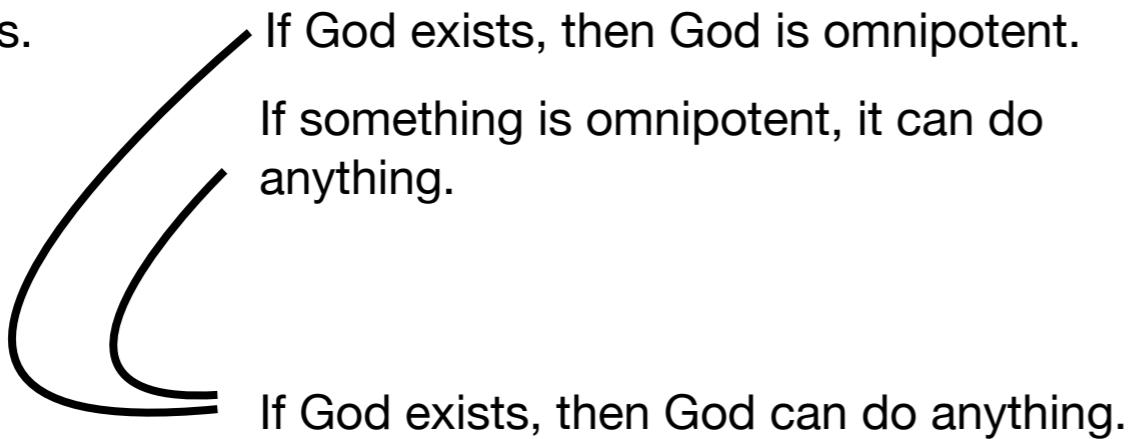
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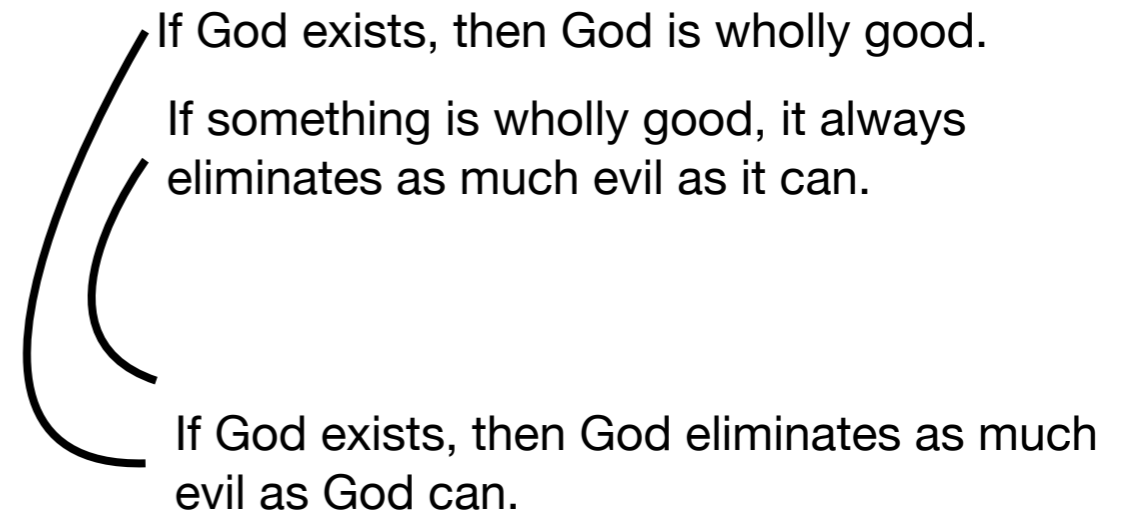
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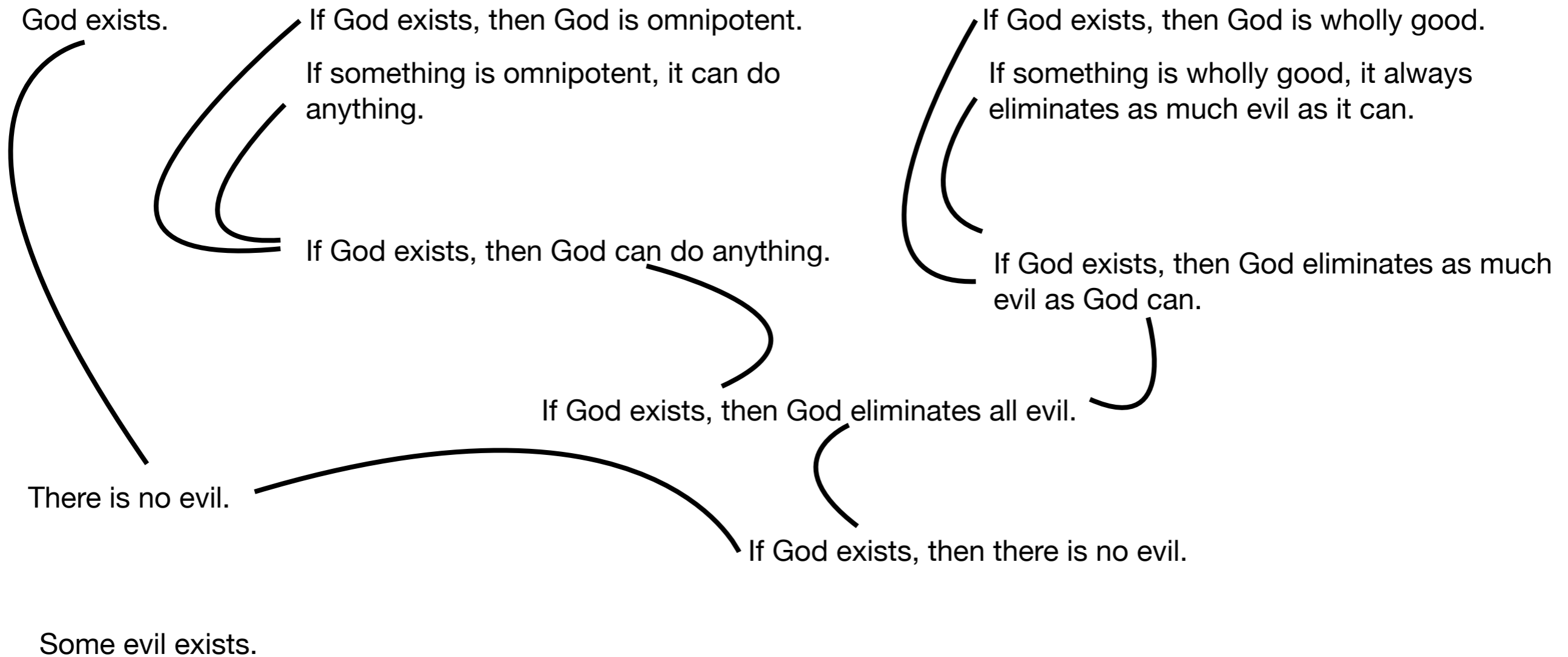
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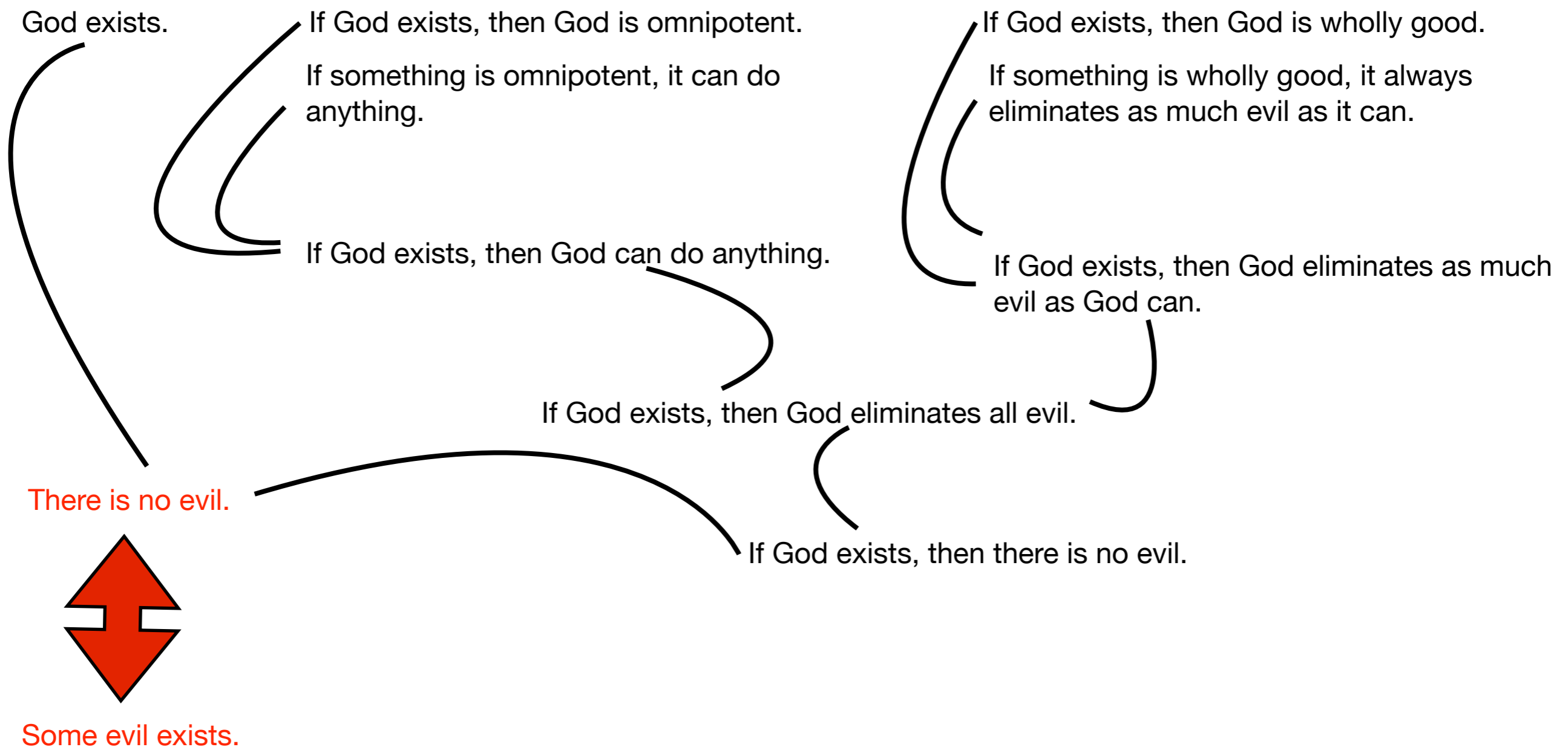
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This is a different sort of argument than any we have discussed so far: it is an argument which is designed to have a clearly false conclusion.

We know that if an argument has a false conclusion, it cannot be a sound argument. Hence it must either be invalid, or have a false premise. In this case, the argument appears to be valid, so it looks as though one of the premises must be false. Mackie's aim is to convince you that the false premise is the first one: the claim that God exists.

An argument of this sort --- which is designed to convince you that one of the premises is false, because it leads by a valid argument to a false conclusion --- is called a **reductio ad absurdum**, or just a **reductio** for short.

The argument from evil does not have to be presented in this way, but it is the easiest way to think about the argument. Often it is easier to see how to argue for a claim by a reductio argument than by trying to come up with a sound argument with the claim as conclusion.

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Let's grant that the conclusion is false, and that the argument is valid. For Mackie to convince us that premise (1) is to blame for leading to this conclusion -- and hence false -- he has to convince us that **no other** premise is to blame. That is, he has to convince us that no other premise is false.

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These divide naturally into two groups: claims 1, 2, and 5 state claims which are essential to most traditional sorts of religious belief, while claims 3, 6, and 11 do not.

Since Mackie's aim is to show that traditional forms of religious belief are inconsistent, and hence irrational, his aim is to show that one of claims 1, 2 and 6 is false. Accordingly, the defender of traditional religious belief must argue that **one of 3, 6, and 11 is false.**

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It is difficult to argue that 11 is false; it is difficult to argue that it is never the case that things would have been better if they had gone another way. So it seems as though the defender of traditional theism must argue that one of 3 and 6 is false.

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But as it turns out, these claims are not quite so innocent. Let's begin by discussing premise 3. Can this be plausibly denied by the defender of theism?

Here is a natural reply to this premise: not even an omnipotent being can do something which is **impossible**. For example, no one thinks that God could create a four-sided three-angled plane closed figure, and no one thinks that God could make an object which is both bright red and bright green all over. So it is not really true that an omnipotent being could do **anything**.

We'll return to some puzzles involving omnipotence in a bit; but for now, the important thing to see is that this objection to 3 does not really do much to help the defender of theism. After all, 3 could just be changed to say that an omnipotent being can do anything that it is possible to do, and we could still derive the conclusion that if God exists, God eliminates all the evil that it is possible to eliminate. And it seems very plausible that this is not the case: **it seems very plausible there is some evil which is such that it is possible for it not to exist.**

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So it seems that the best hope for the defender of theism is to take the view that premise 6 is false: wholly good beings do not eliminate as much evil as they can.

But how could this be? Why would a wholly good being not eliminate some evil that it was within its power to eliminate?

Mackie considers, and rejects, three main reasons for denying premise (3).

### Response 1: Evil is necessary for good.

Good cannot exist without evil; since evil is a **necessary** counterpart to goodness, even an omnipotent being could not make a world with goodness but no evil. So, God creates a world with evil because it is the only way to make a world which contains good.

Mackie distinguishes two different ways to understand this objection:

- (1) **Given the way the laws of nature are and the way human beings are constructed**, it is impossible for there to be good without evil; evil is a means to good, as the pain you feel in the dentist's chair is a means to toothache relief.
- (2) Good is **logically impossible** without evil; good and evil are related in the way that relative bigness and relative smallness are related.

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### **Response 2: A universe with some evil is better than a universe with none.**

A universe with some evil will often be better than a universe with none, since certain kinds of goods logically require the existence of a certain sort of evil. For example, certain kinds of mercy are clearly goods, but these would be impossible without the existence of suffering. And isn't it better to have a world with merciful acts than without them?

The distinction between 1st and 2nd order goods, and the problem of higher order evils.



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This leads to the most important objection to Mackie's argument:

### **Response 3: The free will defense.**

God allows evil for the sake of our free will. Free will is a great good, and it is impossible for God to give us free will without allowing evil. So, God allows evil to exist.

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Is this an objection to premise 3 or premise 6?

It is obviously a crucial part of this objection that it is impossible for God to both give us free will and prevent any evil from occurring; otherwise, the goodness of free will could hardly explain God's decision to permit evil to exist.

## The argument from evil

1. God exists.
  2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
  3. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
  4. If God exists, then God can do anything. (2,3)
  5. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
  6. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
  7. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (5,6)
  8. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (4,7)
  9. If God exists, then there is no evil. (8)
  10. There is no evil. (1,9)
  11. Some evil exists.
- 
- C. There is evil and there is no evil. (10,11)

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## Response 3: The free will defense.

God allows evil for the sake of our free will. Free will is a great good, and it is impossible for God to give us free will without allowing evil. So, God allows evil to exist.

And this, Mackie thinks, is just why the free will defense fails:

*"if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right."*

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## Response 3: The free will defense.

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One might think of Mackie as giving the following argument:

1. It is possible for all people to have free will and never cause evil.
  2. If it is possible for the world to be a certain way, then God could have made it that way.
- 
- C. God could have made the world such that all people have free will and never cause evil.

If Mackie's argument is sound, then it looks like the free will defense is in trouble.

We will return to this topic next time. But for now let's spend a few minutes talking about your first full length paper.

## First 5-7 page paper

PHIL 10100

Due: in discussion sections, Friday, February 26 (the Friday before spring break)

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Below are four topics for your first paper. You are welcome to come up with your own topic, though you must get the written approval of your TA by email first. If you do this, the question that your TA approves should be on the first page of your essay. The papers should be at most 5-7 pages in length, double-spaced and with reasonable margins and font.

A late penalty of 3 points per day, including weekends, will be assessed for any papers which are handed in late.

Plagiarism is a serious and growing problem at Notre Dame and other universities. It is your responsibility to acquaint yourselves with the University's honor code, as well as with the philosophy department's guidelines regarding plagiarism. Both are linked from the course web site.

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1. Explain Leibniz's cosmological argument. Should the proponent of the argument say that the fact that God created contingent things is itself contingent, or necessary? Is the argument in the end a good argument for the existence of God? Why or why not?
2. Explain Hume's argument against the possibility of justified belief in God on the basis of testimony about miracles, and some of the problems we discussed with that argument. Do your best to reconstruct Hume's argument in such a way that it avoids those objections.
3. Explain the fine-tuning argument for the existence of God, along with some of the objections discussed in class. Is the argument convincing? Would it change matters if we had good reason to believe in the existence of multiple universes? Does the improbability of the universe's being life-supporting give us good reason to believe in multiple universes?
4. Explain why the following sort of case (the case of "Rowe's fawn") poses a challenge for the believer in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God:

"... in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering ..."

How should a traditional theist explain this sort of event? Does it provide good evidence that God does not exist? Why or why not?