

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.

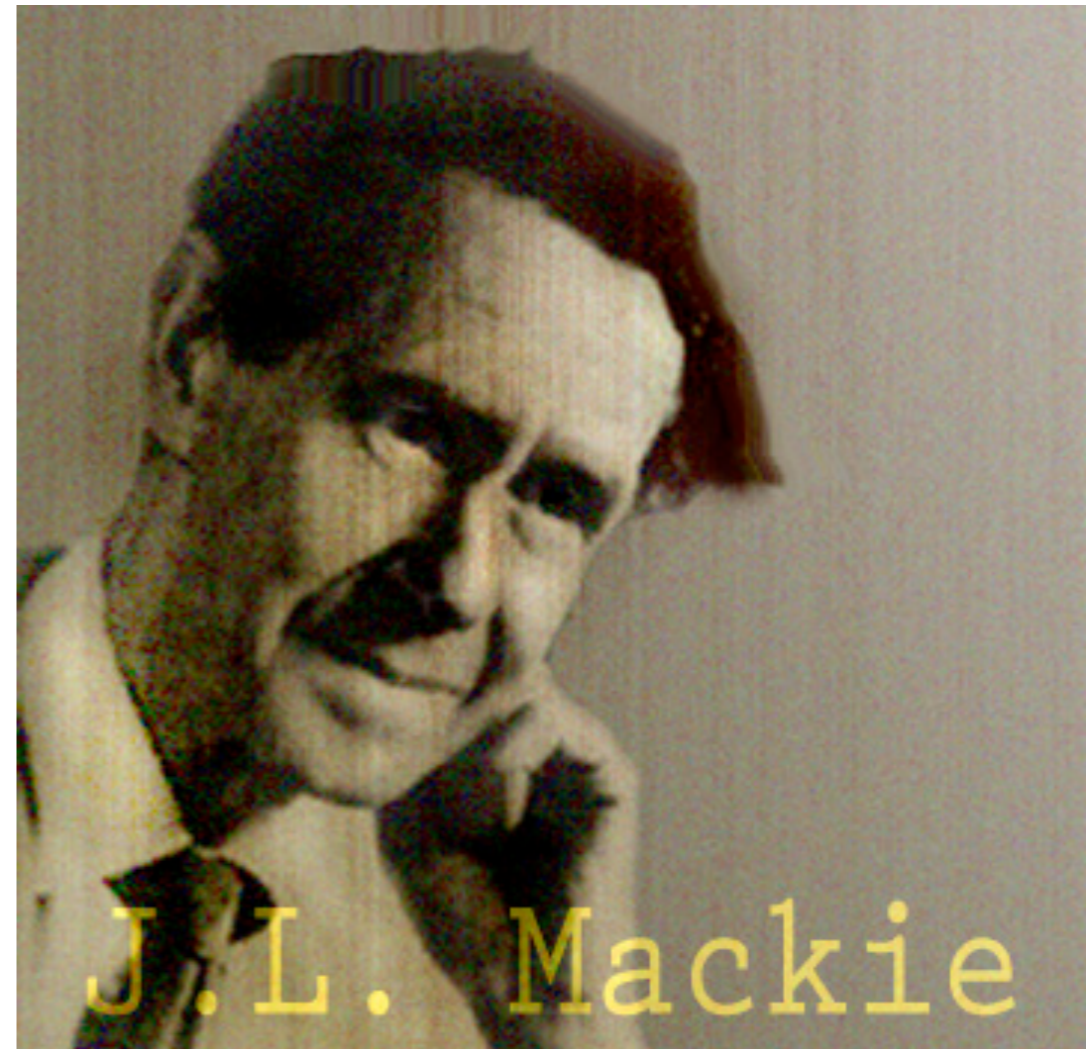
It is, therefore, a paradox only if one believes in God. As we will see, the argument can be presented as a valid argument with a false conclusion; but one of the premises of the argument is the claim that God exists. Therefore, it is a paradox to which atheists have a very easy solution. Atheists will then view the argument not as a paradox, but as a reductio ad absurdum of belief in God. This will be the case with all of the theological paradoxes we will discuss.

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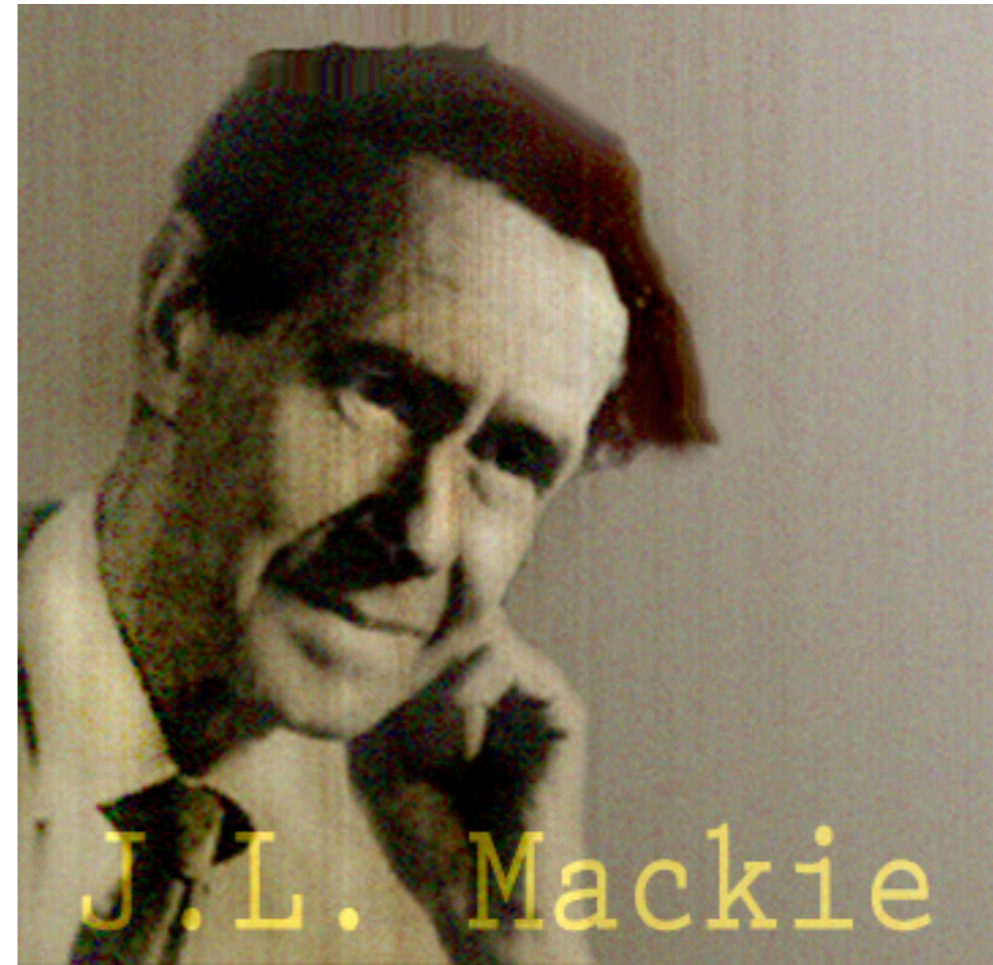
“not only that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.”

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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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.

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 claims with the following three:

God exists.

If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

If God exists, then God is wholly good.

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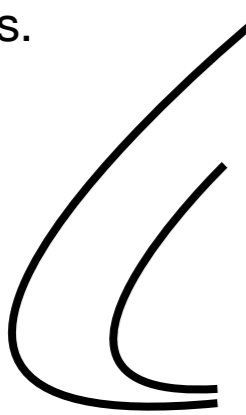
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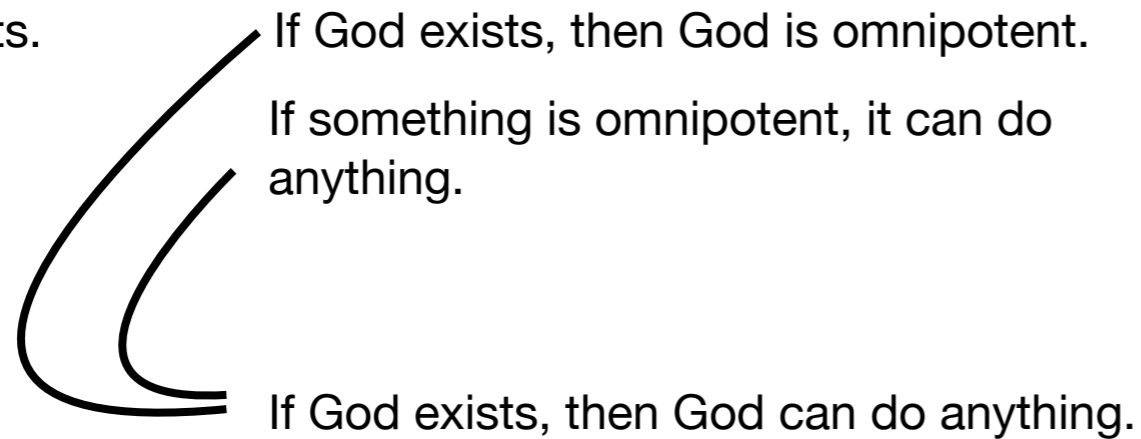
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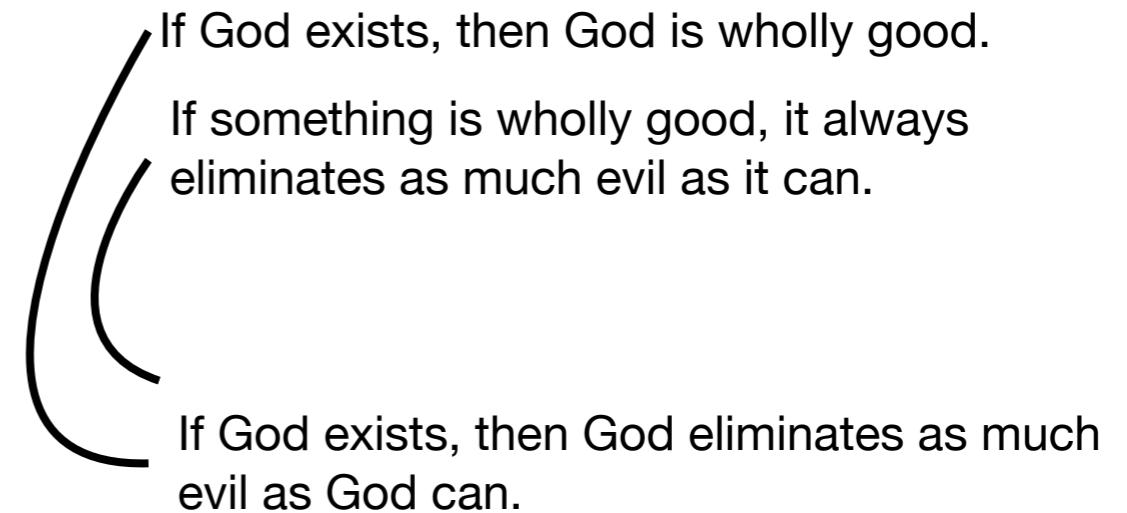
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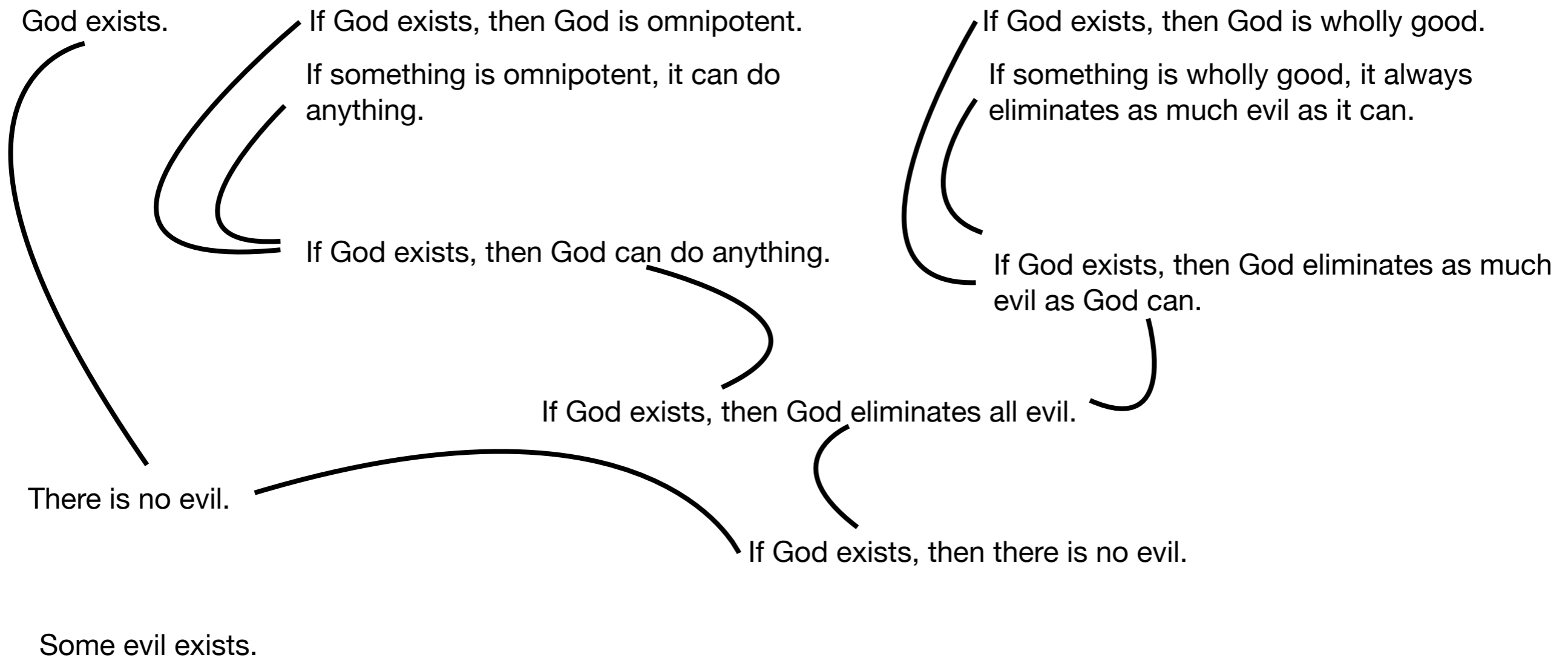
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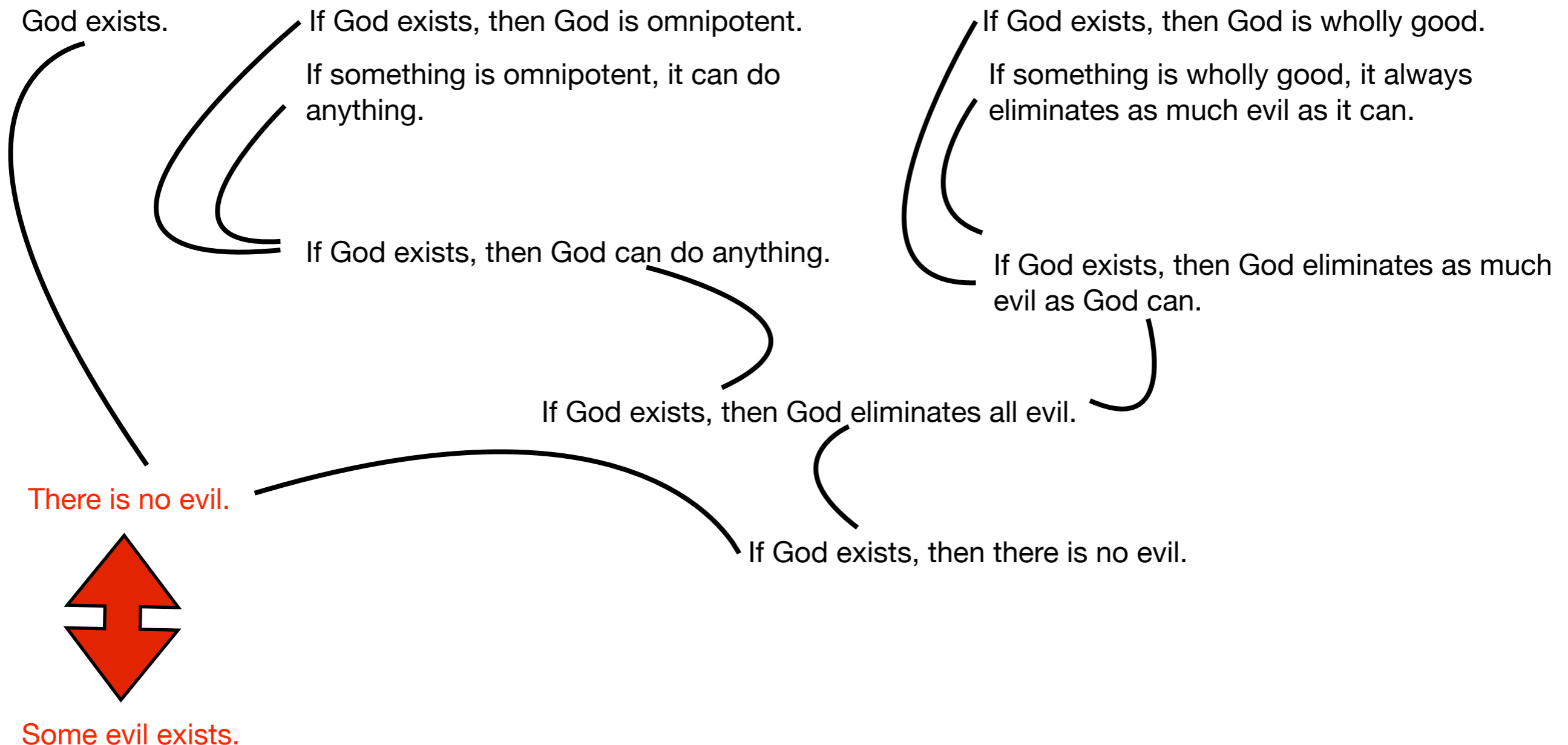
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We know that if an argument has a false conclusion, it cannot be a sound argument. Hence it must either be invalid, or have a false premise. In this case, the argument appears to be valid, so it looks as though one of the premises must be false. Mackie's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

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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We can eliminate the premises which follow from other premises, since we are assuming that the argument is valid. So that gives us six possibilities: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 11.

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 5 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.

This can seem difficult to do: it seems as though 3 and 6 just state what "omnipotent" and "wholly good" mean!

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 bring about any possible situation, 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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It would be good to make this explicit in our argument; what we are assuming is not just that there is evil, but that there is evil which does not necessarily exist.

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In this form, premise 3 seems difficult to reject.

So it seems, at this point, 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.

Mackie considers a few different versions of this sort of response to the argument.

Response 1: God permits evil because evil is often a means to good.

It is undeniable that often evil leads to good consequences; for example, sometimes facing challenges in one's youth leads to greater determination later in life, or suffering at one point leads to greater appreciation of pleasures later. Perhaps God permits evil for the sake of the goods to which the evil leads.

Mackie thinks that this response to his argument ultimately involves denying God's omnipotence. Why does he think this?

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Response 2: God permits evil because evil is the opposite of good, and it is impossible for a thing to exist without its opposite.

It is not just that evil often leads to good; it's also the case that it is simply impossible for good to exist without evil. Hence even an omnipotent being who wants to bring about good must also allow some evil.

This encourages Mackie to compare the good/evil distinction to the small/large distinction. Why does he think that this comparison shows that something is wrong with this sort of response to the argument?

Further, there is something puzzling about this line of objection out of the mouth of a traditional theist. Wasn't there goodness, and no evil, before God created anything? And isn't heaven supposed to be all good?

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Response 3: Certain, specific goods could not exist without certain evils; God allows evil for the sake of these goods.

It is impossible to be merciful if no one is suffering; it is impossible to be perseverant unless one faces challenges. But mercy, and perseverance, are goods; God allows evil for the sake of these goods.

In response, Mackie points out the existence of higher-order evils. Why are these a problem for the present line of objection to premise 6?

This leads to the most important response to Mackie's argument: the **free will defense**.

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Because free will is a good, a wholly good being might wish for others to have free will. But it is impossible to both give free will to creatures and stop them from using that free will to do evil. (To do the latter would be to take away, to that extent, their free will.) Hence a wholly good creature might well **not** eliminate evil which it was within its power to eliminate, when doing so would be an infringement on the free will of the creature causing the evil.

It is natural to regard this as an objection to premise 6 of the argument: the idea would then be that it is impossible for even an omnipotent being to give us free will while preventing evil.

This is just the claim to which Mackie objects.

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“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.”

This objection could be summarized as follows:

Mackie's objection to the free will defense

- 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.

The argument from evil (version 2)

1	God exists.	
2	If God exists, then God is omnipotent.	
3	If something is omnipotent, then it can bring about any possible state of affairs.	
4	If God exists, then God can bring about any possible state of affairs.	2, 3
5	If God exists, then God is wholly good.	
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7	If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can.	5, 6
8	If God exists, then God eliminates all evil that it is possible to eliminate.	4, 7
9	If God exists, then there is no evil that could have failed to exist.	8
10	There is no evil that could have failed to exist.	1, 9
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The free will defense

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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. But if Mackie's argument is sound, this is simply a mistake.

One response would be to deny premise 1. But, in the end, this does not seem very plausible. Surely God wished that we would not use our free will to bring about evil; was God, irrationally, wishing for something impossible to be the case?

Intuitively, what one wants to say is that it is possible for everyone to always freely do the right thing, but impossible for God to **make** them freely do the right thing. This suggests that the free will defense's best objection to Mackie's argument is to reject premise 2, not premise 1.

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This response to Mackie's argument against the free will defense involves some substantial assumptions about the nature of free will. In particular, it seems to require that **incompatibilism** be true. Can you see why?

This also introduces some puzzles about the nature of omnipotence. Earlier, we discussed the idea that even an omnipotent being could not bring about an impossible state of affairs, like a round square. But now we are saying that there are some **possible** states of affairs that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. So what does omnipotence mean, anyway?

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This is a difficult question, which we would have discussed if you had voted to discuss the paradox of the burrito. But it brings out the fact that, on one plausible interpretation, the free will defense involves a rejection of premise 3 as well as premise 6 of Mackie's argument.

Now let's turn to some ways of developing the argument from evil to which the free will defense does not seem to offer a solution.

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These versions of the argument grant that the existence of God is consistent with the existence of **some** evil - and therefore grant that Mackie's argument to the contrary is unsuccessful - but argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with the **amount** and **type** of evil that we find in the world.

One kind of evil we observe in the world which is immediately problematic from the point of view of the free will defense is **natural evil**: evil which is not directly caused by human free actions. The suffering which results from various natural disasters is an obvious and important example of evil of this kind.

It is worth noting that many of the examples on which we naturally focus are actually mixed cases: cases in which the natural disaster in question is partly the result of human free action, and partly not. So, for example, though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc. But it is very implausible that we can explain all of the evil which results from natural disasters in this way; it is presumably true that there would be hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes without human intervention, just as these events occurred many times before human beings were on the scene.

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This argument is a bit of a mouthful. But it is, structurally, just like the earlier versions of the argument. Moreover, the conclusion of the argument is still a contradiction, so, given that it is valid, it must still have a false premise. As before, the theist cannot reject 1, 2, or 5, and hence must reject 3, 6, or 11. But it now seems very hard to reject 3; and the free will defense does not seem to give us any reason for rejecting premise 6.

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One might, then, think of rejecting 11. This is Alvin Plantinga's strategy, (in the optional readings) which might be paraphrased as follows:

Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.

Plantinga does not think that he knows this to be true; but he does think that it is true for all we know, and hence allows the theist to have a way of blocking the argument from natural evil.

But there are other ways of responding to this argument, all of which focus on premises 6 and 11.

The argument from natural evil: the key premises

- 6 If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being.
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But there are other ways of responding to this argument, all of which focus on premises 6 and 11.

van Inwagen (in the other optional reading) develops a response along the following lines:

Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid.

To which of the above premises is van Inwagen objecting?

It seems that he must be objecting mainly to 6. After all, even if van Inwagen's story were true, God could still stop natural disasters from happening without interfering with human free will, right?

The idea instead seems to be that part of the value of free will comes from one's having responsibility for the effects of one's actions. And, if God were to, in general, stop bad consequences of free actions, this would remove that responsibility.

However, it seems that the proponent of the argument from natural evil might have a way of responding to this sort of objection; perhaps they can modify the key premises of their argument as follows:

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However, it seems that the proponent of the argument from natural evil might have a way of responding to this sort of objection; perhaps they can modify the key premises of their argument as follows:

The argument from natural evil, version 2: the key premises

- 6 If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being **if that evil is not the result of any human free action.**
- 11 Some evil exists which is such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being, **or the results of the free actions of any being.**

But are there any evils of the sort described in (11)?

A plausible example would be the suffering of animals in times before the existence of human beings. You might want to think about how, if at all, the sort of story van Inwagen tells could be adapted to that sort of example.

The argument from natural evil, version 2: the key premises

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The basic version of the argument from evil focuses on the existence of **some** evil in the world. As we have seen, the argument can be made more challenging if we focus on the existence of particular **types** of evil. It can also be made more challenging if we focus on the **amount** of evil we find in the world - either the total amount, or the amount a single individual may have to suffer.

Considering the amounts of evil we find, one might well ask: even if free will is a good, **is it really that good**? Is it good enough that it justifies all of the suffering we find in the world?

One might also wonder, more fundamentally, whether free will is a good at all. One way to press this in a theological setting is to ask whether God has free will. A standard view about God is that God is not just all good, but essentially so — so that it is impossible that God be less than perfectly good. But then it seems to follow that God is not free to do evil — if it is impossible that God do evil, then even God isn't able to do evil. But if God lacks the ability to do evil, why is it so very important that we have this ability?

The problem of evil can thus be thought of as a paradox which involves free will in a different way — not just as raising questions about its possibility, but about its value.