

Does God exist?

The argument from evil





One of the oldest, and most important, arguments against the existence of God 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.

The reading for today is a powerful version of that argument, which is due to the Australian 20th century philosopher John Mackie.





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.



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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.

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can do anything.

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

If God exists, then God is wholly good.

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

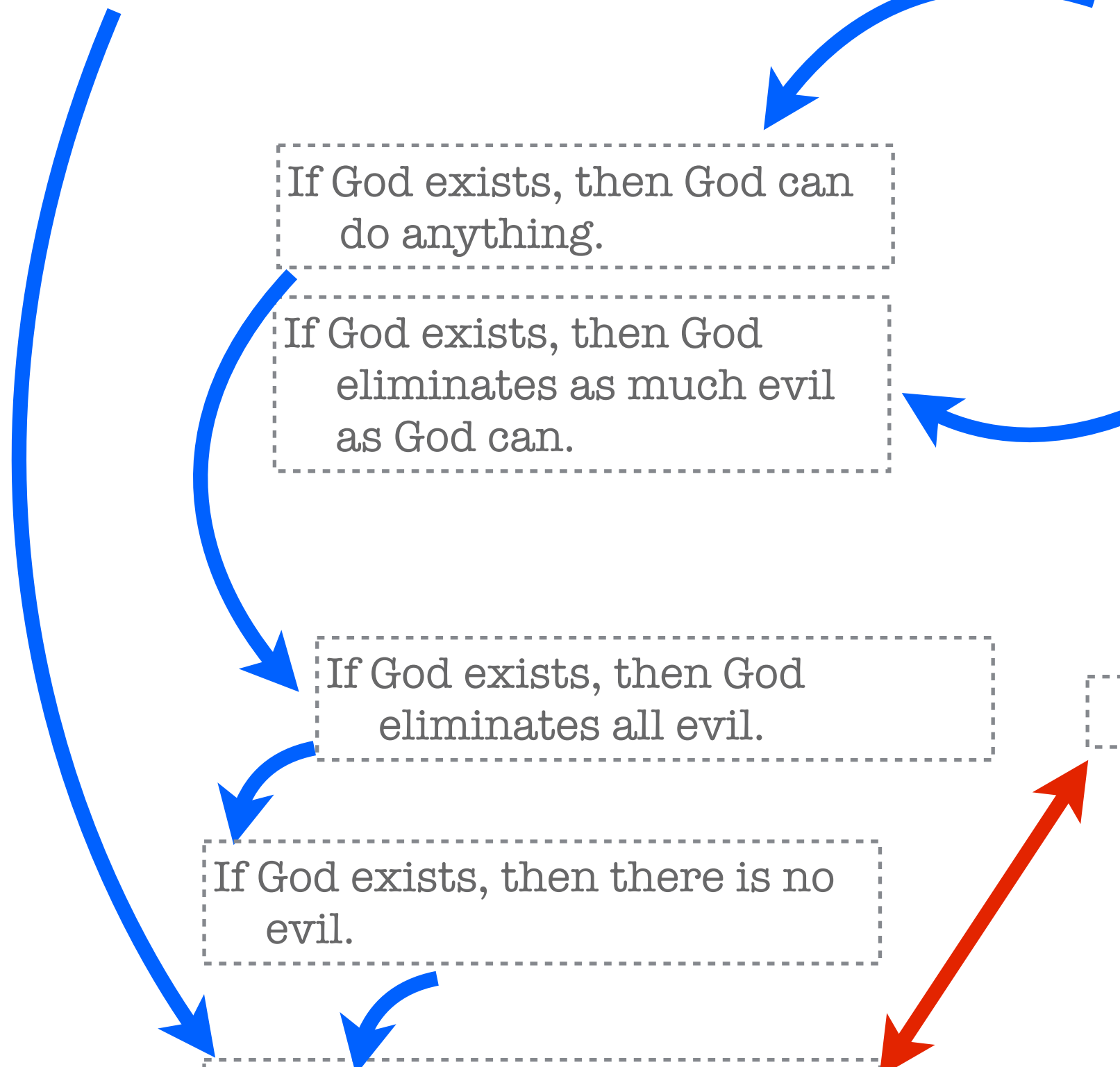
If God exists, then God eliminates all evil.

If God exists, then there is no evil.

Some evil exists.

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.



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 no evil and some evil exists. (10,11)

This is a form of argument called **reductio ad absurdum** - 'reduction to absurdity.'

Unlike every other argument discussed to this point, it is a kind of argument designed to have a false conclusion. Why might one give an argument with a false conclusion? What can be learned from an argument of this sort?



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Given that the argument is valid and that it has a false conclusion, we know that one of the six independent premises must be false.

Mackie's aim is to convince you that premise (1) is the false premise.

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  5. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
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C. There is no evil and some evil exists. (10,11)

It would be difficult for any sort of traditional believer in God to reject premises (1), (2), or (5).

So it looks like the believer in God must reject one of premises (3), (6), or (11).

It seems difficult to solve Mackie's problem by denying (3) or (11). It seems very obvious that there is evil in the world; and the reason why there is evil can't be that God is powerless to stop it from happening.



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

So attention naturally focuses on premise (6).

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

Can this help us to understand why a wholly good being might not eliminate as much evil as it can?

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

It seems plausible that a wholly good being might not eliminate some evil E when the following two conditions are met:

- (1) there is some good G such that G outweighs E,  
and
- (2) the being cannot bring about G without also permitting E

This falsifies premise (6) of Mackie's original argument.

Can you think of a way that Mackie might revise his argument to get around this problem?



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Let's call any evil for which there is **no** greater good such that God could not have brought about the good without permitting the evil an **unredeemed evil**.

Then Mackie might try to replace premise (6) in his original argument with the following:

6\*. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much unredeemed evil as it can.

This premise looks hard to deny. Let's see how it might fit into Mackie's argument.

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  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 unredeemed evil as it can.
  - 7\*. If God exists, then God eliminates as much unredeemed evil as God can. (5,6\*)
  - 8\*. If God exists, then God eliminates all unredeemed evil. (4,7\*)
  - 9\*. If God exists, then there is no unredeemed evil. (8\*)
  - 10\*. There is no unredeemed evil. (1,9\*)
  11. Some evil exists.
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- C. There is no unredeemed evil and some evil exists. (10\*,11)

This argument simply replaces (6) with (6\*), and makes the corresponding changes to steps of the argument which are supposed to follow from (6\*).

Is this still an effective reductio argument?

To make the argument imply a contradiction, we need to change premise (11).



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  - 10\*. There is no unredeemed evil. (1,9\*)
  - 11\*. Some unredeemed evil exists.
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- C. There is no unredeemed evil and some unredeemed evil exists. (10\*, 11\*)

To make the argument imply a contradiction, we need to change premise (11).

Just as in the case of Mackie's original argument it seems that the religious believer must reject one of (3), (6), or (11), so it seems that in the case of the revised argument the religious believer must reject one of (3), (6\*), and (11\*). Which seems like the most promising choice?

11 \*. Some unredeemed evil exists.

If one denies this, then what one is saying is that, for every evil we encounter in the world, there is some good G such that (1) G outweighs the evil, and (2) God could not have brought about G without permitting the evil.

Both aspects of this definition of unredeemed evil raise problems for this denial.



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On part (1): Consider some particularly horrific evil — like the Holocaust, or the shooting in Newtown. It is not at all implausible to say that, horrible as these events were, some good thing came out of them. But isn't it massively implausible to say that goods came out of them which outweighed the evil they involved? Wouldn't that imply, ludicrously, that if, say, Hitler foresaw whatever the good consequences of the Holocaust might be, he would have been justified in setting it in motion?

On part (2): Many of the cases where human agents are justified in permitting evil to occur for the sake of some later good only make sense against the background of our limited powers. For example: a dentist is surely justified in causing pain in order to fix some dental condition; but this wouldn't be true of an omnipotent dentist, whom we would justifiably resent! Consider the pain of some animal killed by a predator. One might be inclined to say that God is justified in permitting this because it leads to the survival of the predator. But once we keep in mind God's omnipotence, this looks pretty implausible. Could it really be true that the only way that an omnipotent being can sustain the life of a lion is by having it kill some other animal?

So while it is not at all implausible to say that God often brings good out of evil, it is not at all clear that this thought by itself provides an effective response to our revised version of Mackie's argument.

Next time, we'll ask whether the idea that freedom of the will is a great good might fare better as a response to that argument.