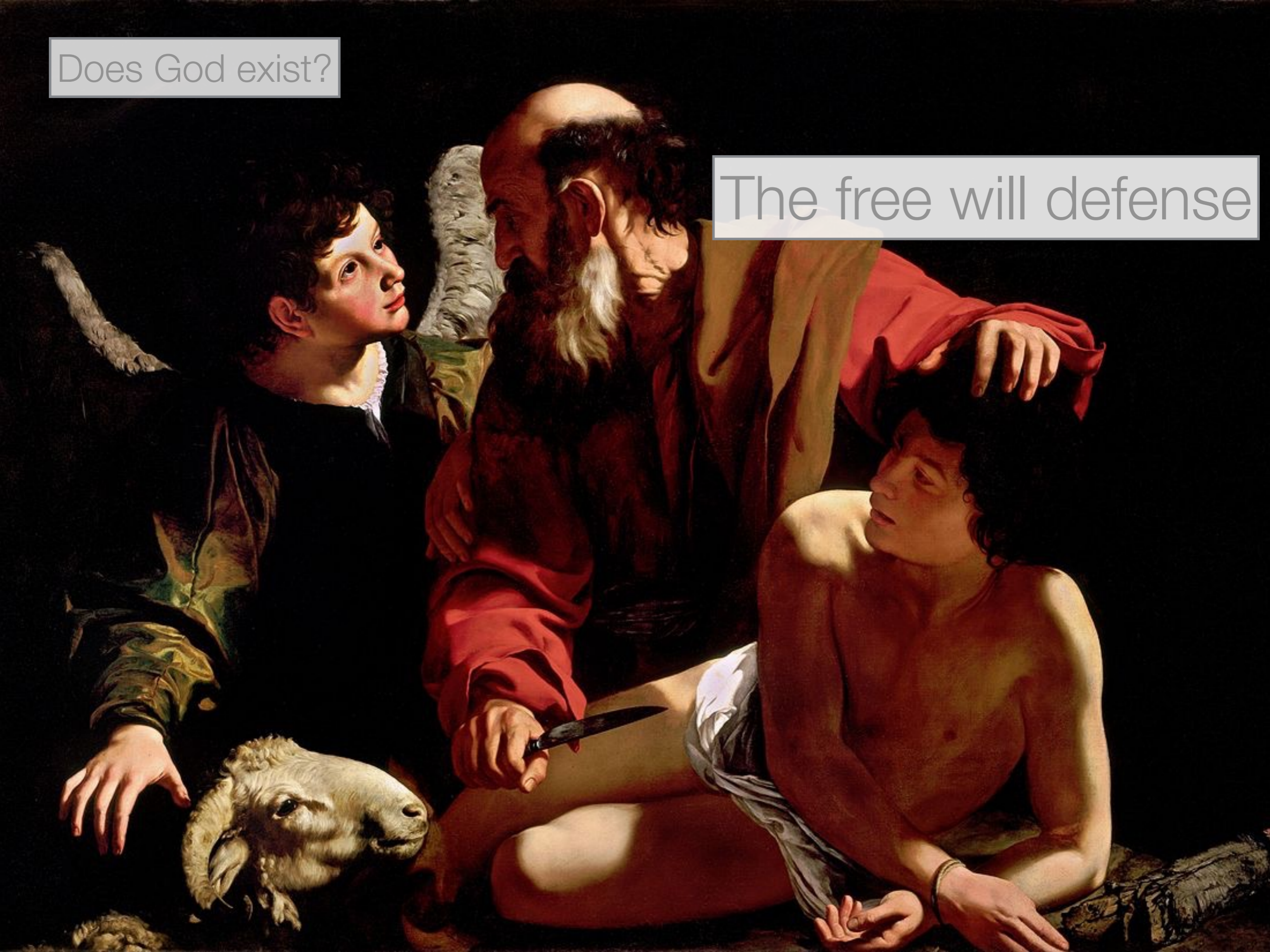


Does God exist?

The free will defense



The key premise of Mackie's argument, as we presented it, was this one:

11*. Some forbidden-for-God evil exists.

This says that there is some evil which is such that there is no greater good that God could not have brought about without allowing that evil.

So, one who denies (11*) is committed to the following claim:

For every evil in the world, there is some greater good which even God could not have brought about without allowing that evil.

The problem, as we've seen, is that in the case of some evils it is hard to see what the corresponding good could be.

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The most prominent reply to Mackie's argument focuses on the good of free will. This reply is often called the 'free will defense':


The free will defense

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.


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The free will defense is open to two different kinds of objections:



Some but not all evil is redeemed by free will



No evil at all is redeemed by free will

Mackie thinks that the free will defense is a complete failure: it explains no evil at all.

Here's what Mackie says about the free will defense:

“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.”

It is key to the free will defense that it is impossible for God to give us the good of free will without also letting into the universe the evil we cause with that free will.

Mackie is giving us an argument against that assumption.

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It is possible for all people to have free will and yet never bring about any evil.

God can bring about any possible situation.

God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil.

1. It is possible for all people to have free will and yet never bring about any evil.
2. God can bring about any possible situation.

C. God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil. (1,2)

If the conclusion of this argument is true, then evil caused by human free will is forbidden-for-God — which is enough to make (11*) true.

11*. Some forbidden-for-God evil exists.

How should the proponent of the free will defense respond to this argument?

Most people are initially inclined to reject premise (1).

But this faces some challenges.

First, God is free and yet never brings about any evil; so why should it be impossible to be free and never bring about any evil?

Second, many think that God wants us never to bring about any evil. Is God then wishing for something impossible?

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Suppose that we reject (2). This raises the question: what is omnipotence, if not the ability to bring about anything possible?

One might try:

A being is omnipotent if it can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

But this seems too weak.

Suppose that we reject (2). This raises the question: what is omnipotence, if not the ability to bring about anything possible?

We could try instead:

A being is omnipotent if it can do anything that it is possible for any being to do.

But this definition seems too strong. Consider the action 'Jeff Speaks freely eating a hamburger for lunch.' I can bring this about — but God cannot.

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Perhaps we could go for:

A being is omnipotent if and only if that being is maximally powerful — i.e., is such that it is not possible for any being to be more powerful than it.

Does this help?

Suppose that we can block Mackie's argument by revising our view of God's omnipotence.

One might think that a problem remains. There's a different way in which God could have given us free will while preventing the evil to which it actually gives rise: God could have only ever given us choices between alternative actions which lead to no evil. Suppose, for example, that we only ever had choices between different flavors of jelly beans.

Doesn't this possibility deliver the conclusion of Mackie's argument by itself, without the help of any assumptions about omnipotence?

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Here's what Richard Swinburne says about this:

It is good that the free choices of humans should include *genuine* responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity to benefit *or* harm them. God has the power to benefit or to harm humans. If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, it is good that they have that power too (although perhaps to a lesser degree). A world in which agents can benefit each other but not do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. If my responsibility for you is limited to whether or not to give you a camcorder, but I cannot cause you pain, stunt your growth, or limit your education, then I do not have a great deal of responsibility for you. A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details.

If he is right, the “free will defense” should be called the “free will and genuine responsibility defense.”

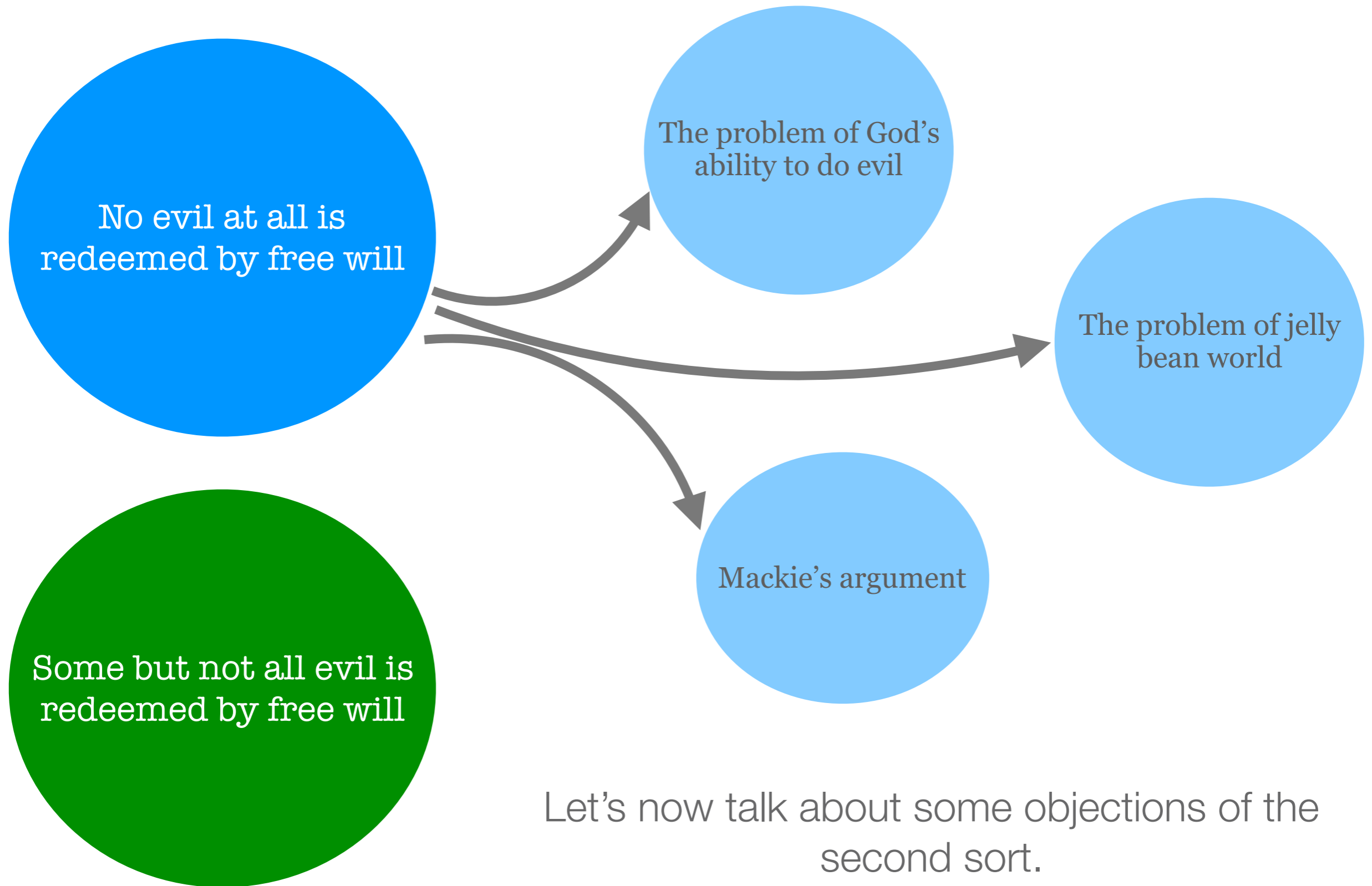
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But this addition to the free will defense gives rise to a puzzle. One way to bring out the puzzle is to ask: Can God do evil?

The standard answer to this question is that God cannot; that God is not just good, but **necessarily** good.

But suppose that this is right. This makes it somewhat mysterious why it should be so important that we have the ability to bring about evil. If God does not have this ability, and God is morally perfect, why should it be so important for us to have this ability? And it must be **very** important, given the amount of suffering which it has caused.

Above I mentioned two different sorts of resistance to the free will defense:




Let's now talk about some objections of the second sort.

Some but not all evil is redeemed by free will

Evil not caused by free actions

The problem of particularly awful evils





Evil not caused by
free actions

Evil not caused by free actions is sometimes called 'natural evil.' Suppose that there is some natural evil which it is possible to eliminate, and which is not outweighed by any good. That would seem to show that, no matter what the free will defender says, premise (11') is true:

11'. Some unredeemed evil exists
that it is possible to eliminate.

One of the main responses to this problem is to argue that many things which seem to be natural evil are in fact the results of free choices.

One version of this strategy is suggested by the contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga:

a more traditional line of thought is indicated by St. Augustine, who attributes much of the evil we find to *Satan* or to Satan and his cohorts. Satan, so the traditional doctrine goes, is a mighty nonhuman spirit who, along with many other angels, was created long before God created man. Unlike most of his colleagues, Satan rebelled against God and has since been wreaking whatever havoc he can. The result is natural evil. So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of nonhuman spirits.

On this sort of view, all evil is caused by the free actions of something — there is, in that sense, no such thing as purely natural evil. Plantinga doesn't claim to know that this is the correct explanation for the evil not caused by human free actions; but he does think that we have no particular reason to doubt that it is true.

There is, however, another way in which one might try to explain the evil caused by natural disasters and the like using the free will defense, which is proposed by Peter van Inwagen in the reading for today. van Inwagen explains, in more depth, a story with the following features:

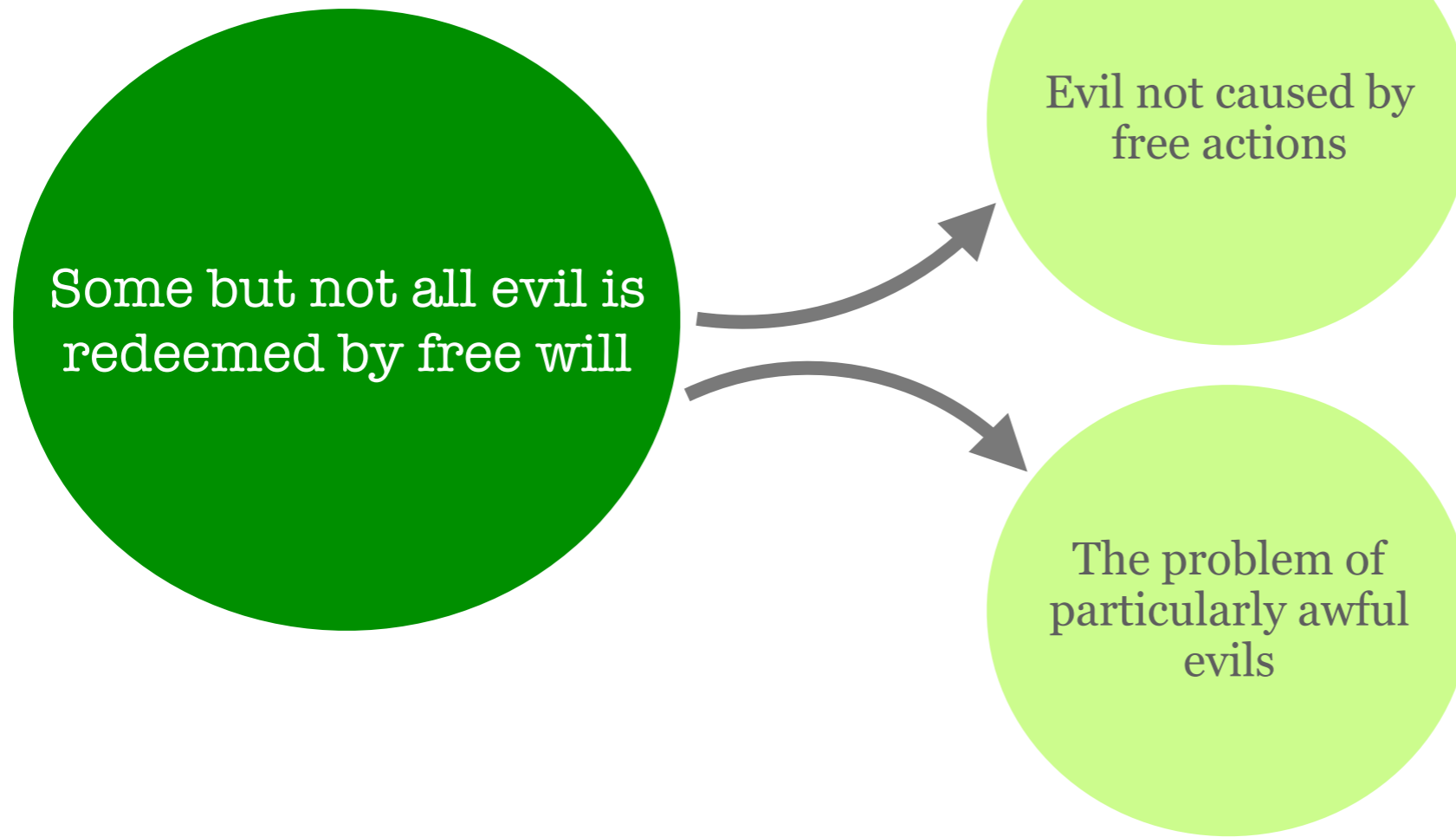
Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed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

van Inwagen's story capitalizes on the fact that natural disasters don't seem to be evil as such, but only evil insofar as they bring about suffering. Hence, if the suffering caused by natural disasters can be explained as the result of human free choice, we will have successfully explained all that needs explaining.

It is worth noting that van Inwagen's story cannot explain every sort of natural evil. A particularly troublesome case is the case of animal suffering before the existence of human beings; William Rowe gives the following example:

"Suppose that 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. ... So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse."

van Inwagen does respond to this sort of case, though not in the reading for today.



Let's turn now to the problem of particularly awful evils, which van Inwagen calls 'horrors.'

The problem of
particularly awful
evils

In today's reading, van Inwagen considers the following sort of argument against God's existence, which is related to but not the same as Mackie's.

Together, these premises entail that there is no perfectly good and omnipotent being. Which, if any, of these premises could be rejected?

The argument from horrors

1. The world contains horrors.
 2. Some horrors are such that the world would be no worse if it did not contain that horror.
 3. If a perfectly good being could omit a horror from the world without making the world any worse, he would.
 4. An omnipotent being could omit some of the relevant horrors from the world.
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- C. There is no perfectly good omnipotent being. (1,2,3,4)

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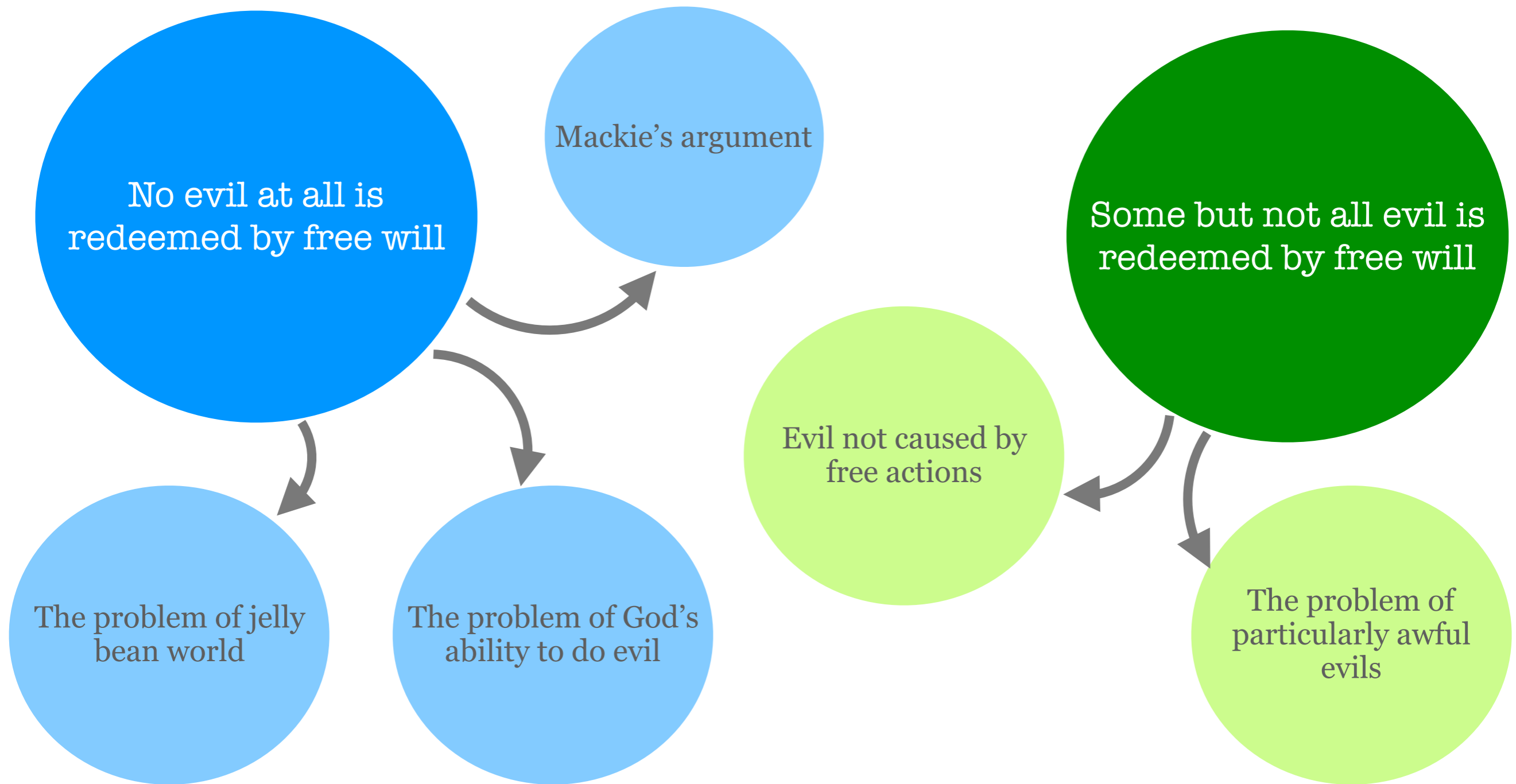
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van Inwagen suggests that we reject (3). This premise, he thinks, only seems plausible insofar as we accept some general claim like

If one is in a position to prevent an evil without causing any more harm or preventing any good, one should do it.

This is a principle which we have been tacitly accepting throughout our discussion.

But van Inwagen argues that this principle is false, using the example of prison sentences. Is his argument convincing?



We've now discussed the main challenges to the free will defense, which is the most important response to the argument from evil. The question you should ask yourself is: can these challenges be withstood? Can free will explain the existence of evil in the world?