# 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.

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Here is one 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.

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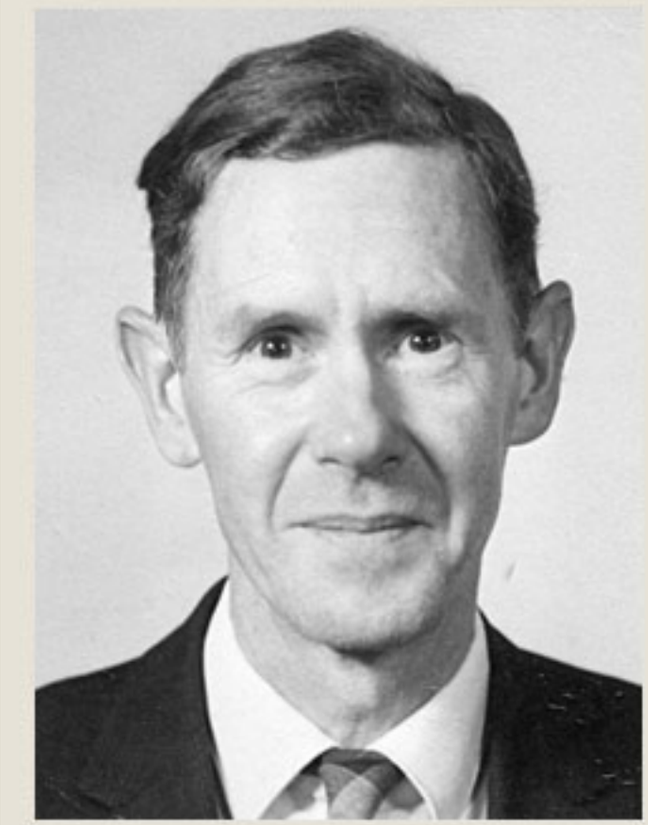
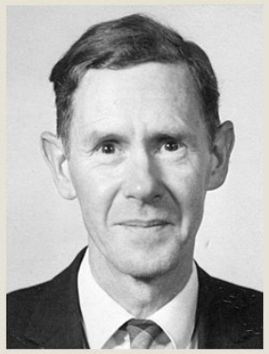
Suppose that this is all true. Would it show that there is no evil in the world, or that the world would not be better if it did not contain the Holocaust?

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.



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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.

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

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

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.

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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.

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.

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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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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.

So attention naturally focuses on premise (6).

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> 6. 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?

6. 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

6. 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

In general, let's say that some evil E is allowable-for-X just in case two things are true: (1) there is some good G which outweighs E, and
(2) X cannot bring about G without E (or some other comparable evil).

Let's say that some evil E is forbidden-for-X otherwise — either, that is, if there is no outweighing good, or if X could have brought about the good without the evil.

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Our examples show that some evils are allowable-for-dentists and allowable-for-parents. This fact seems to show that premise (6) of Mackie's original argument is false.

Others evils, of course, are forbidden-for-dentists and forbidden-for-parents. Indeed, these examples make it very plausible that it is always bad for a being to permit some evil which is forbidden-for-it.

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And this gives us a clue about how Mackie should revise his argument, to avoid our objections to premise (6). It seems like a natural move for him to replace (6) with the following premise:

> 6*. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil which is forbidden-for-it as it can.

Our examples of parents and dentists cast no doubt on (6*). Indeed, if anything, they support it.

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Let's see how our argument looks if we simply replace the problematic premise (6) with (6*).

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C. There is no evil and some evil exists. (10,11)

This argument simply replaces (6) with (6*). But this argument is invalid. To fix it, we need to make some changes to the premises which are supposed to follow from (6).

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C. There is evil and there is no forbidden-for-God evil. (10*,11)

This argument seems to be valid. But is it a successful reductio argument?

You might think that it is not, since the conclusion is no longer obviously false.

What would we have to change to make the conclusion a contradiction again?

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

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C. There is and is not forbidden-for-God evil. (10*,11*)

Now the conclusion is again a contradiction. So we know that the believer in God — who accepts (1), (2), and (5) — must reject one of (3), (6*), and (11*).

Which is the most promising candidate to reject?

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

To reject (11*) is to say that every bit of evil we find in the world is allowable-for-God.

What would it mean for an evil to be allowable-for-God? Two things must be true:


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

The problem comes from another premise of our argument: (3). For if (3) 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.

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

3. 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 allowable-for-it. 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 allowable-for-God.

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

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

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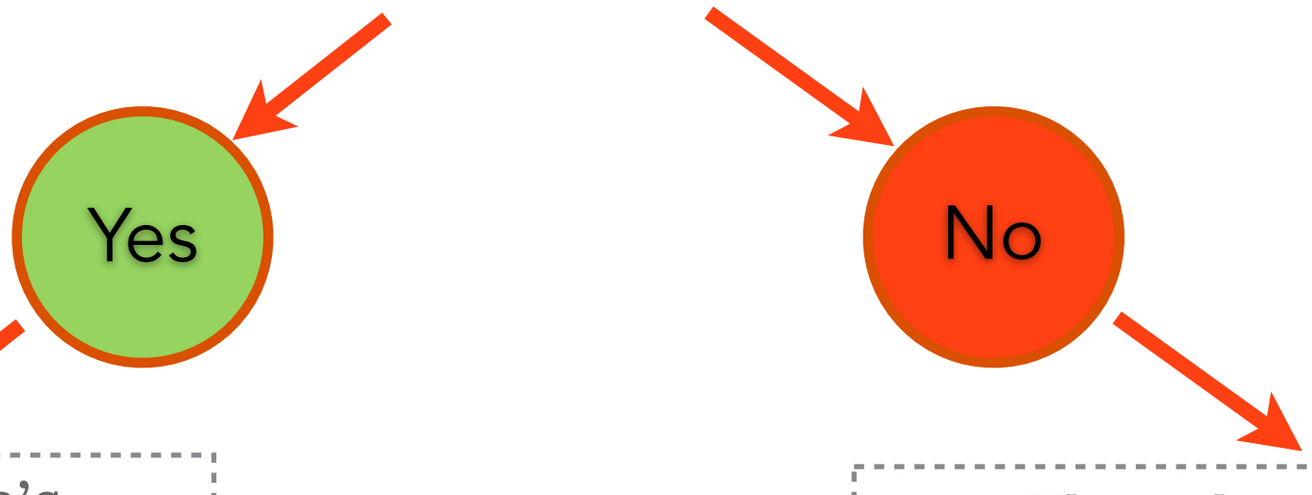
The best move here for someone objecting to Mackie's argument is to say that, contra (3), God cannot do anything. And indeed that is the moral of a very old paradox.

3. 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?




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.

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

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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 (3) gives the wrong account of omnipotence. Aquinas was one of these, and gave us the following argument against the view of omnipotence given by (3):

It is possible that at omnipotent being exists. If (3) is true, then that omnipotent being could do anything. So, if (3) is true, that omnipotent being could make a square circle. So, if (3) is true, it is possible that there could be a square circle. But of course this is not possible. So (3) is false.

But then what could omnipotence be?

Aquinas suggested:

3’. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about any possible situation.

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

Why does the difference between (3) and (3’) matter? Remember that we imagined the proponent of Mackie’s argument wanting to reject (11*).

Mackie’s objection to that move was to say that, since God can do anything, any evil is a forbidden-for-God 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 be allowed-for-God. If every evil is like this, then (11*) is false.

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

Let's now see how our argument looks if we sub in (3') for (3).

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But now the argument is invalid. Can you see why?

Let's fix it.

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But now the argument is invalid. Can you see why?

Let's fix it.

Now (4) follows from (2) and (3').

But does (8*) follow from (4) and (7*)?

This is a little tricky. You might think: 'No, because some forbidden-for-God evils might be impossible to eliminate.' But that would forget the definition of a forbidden-for-God evil, which requires that it be possible for God to bring about the corresponding good without the evil. So it looks like our argument is valid.

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C. There is and is not forbidden-for-God evil. (10*,11*)

The resulting argument is cumbersome, but powerful.

As with previous versions of the argument, it looks like anyone who wants to avoid the reductio without rejecting (1) must reject one of three premises: (3'), (6*), and (11*).

Let's grant that (6*) is true. Then we can simplify the issue a bit.

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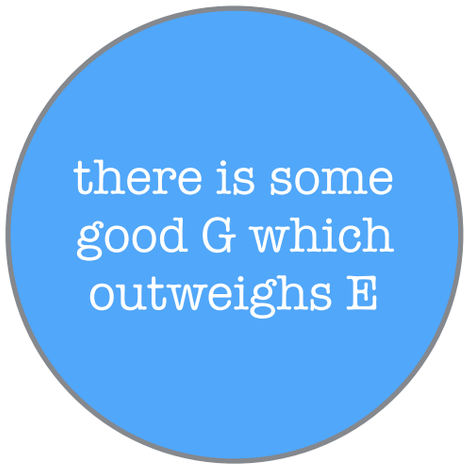
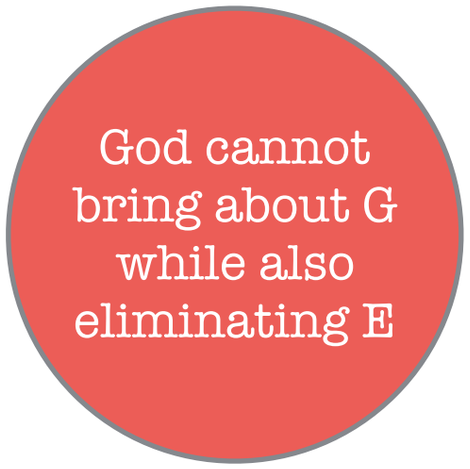
As with previous versions of the argument, it looks like anyone who wants to avoid the reductio without rejecting (1) must reject one of three premises: (3′), (6*), and (11*).

Let's grant that (6*) is true. Then we can simplify the issue a bit.

It looks like, if (6*) is true, the believer in God has to say that, for any evil we find in the world, there must be some greater good such that even God could not have brought about the good without allowing the evil.

That is, for any evil in the world, the believer in God must endorse both of the following claims:




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. Does that meet our two conditions?

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. Does that meet our two conditions?

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