

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.**

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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.

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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?

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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? Was God simply confused in wishing for this?



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Could we reject (2) instead?

While this sounds odd at first, it fits with an intuitive thought about free will. It is tempting to say that while it is possible for me to freely scratch my nose in a minute, it is not possible for God to bring it about that I freely scratch my nose in a minute — since, if God brought it about, then my nose scratching would not be free.

But this is just a way of denying (2) — since it amounts to saying that there is a certain possible scenario that God cannot bring about.

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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.

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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:

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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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  2. God can bring about any possible situation.
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Here's what Richard Swinburne says about this:

“It is good that the free choices of human should include *genuine* responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity to benefit *or* harm them. ... 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. ... A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities ... 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.”

Swinburne seems to be thinking that certain kinds of important human relationships depend on the ability to harm one another. Is that plausible?

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

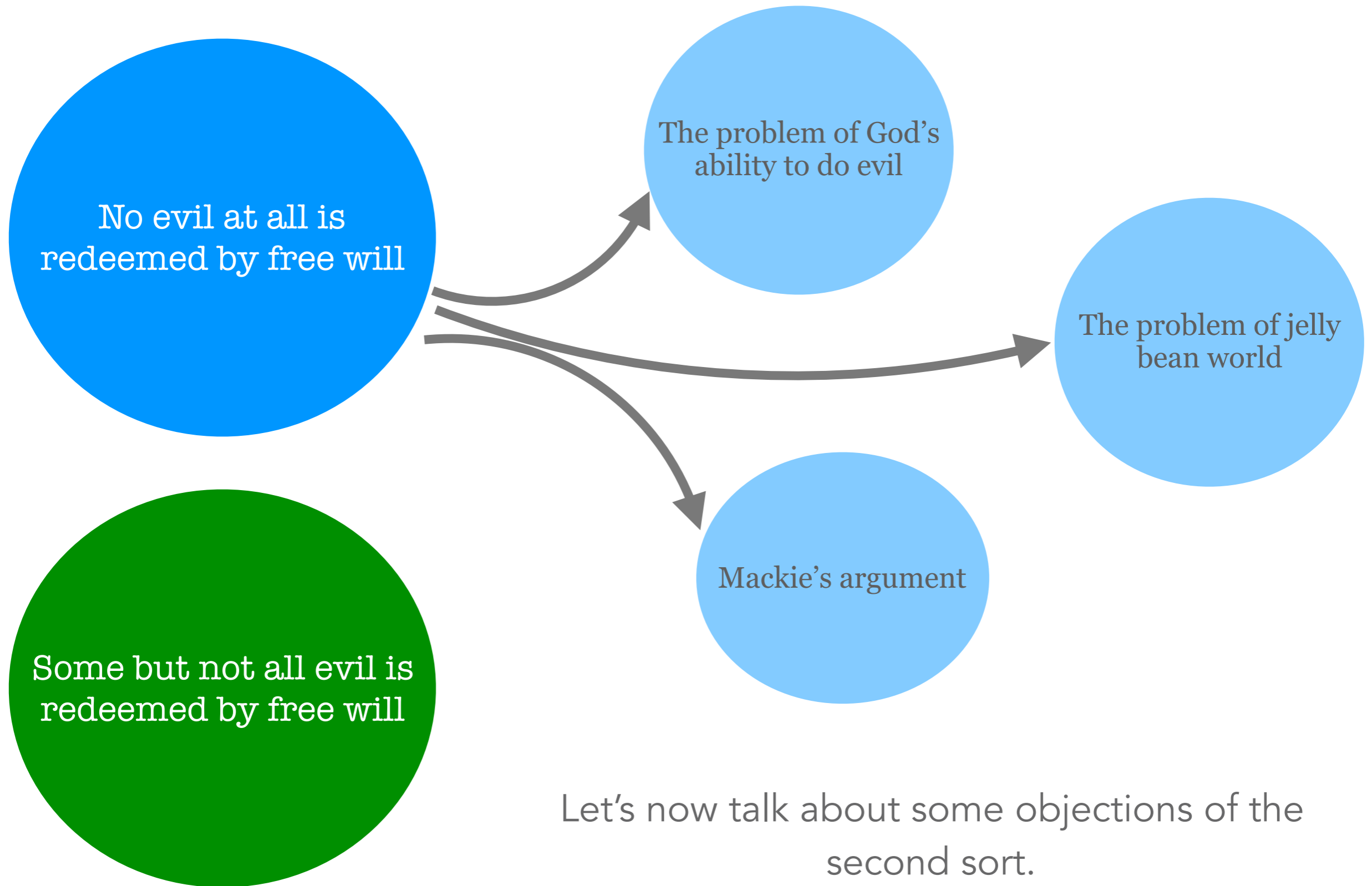
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But this addition to the free will defense gives rise to a puzzle. One way to bring out the puzzle is to ask: Can God do evil?

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

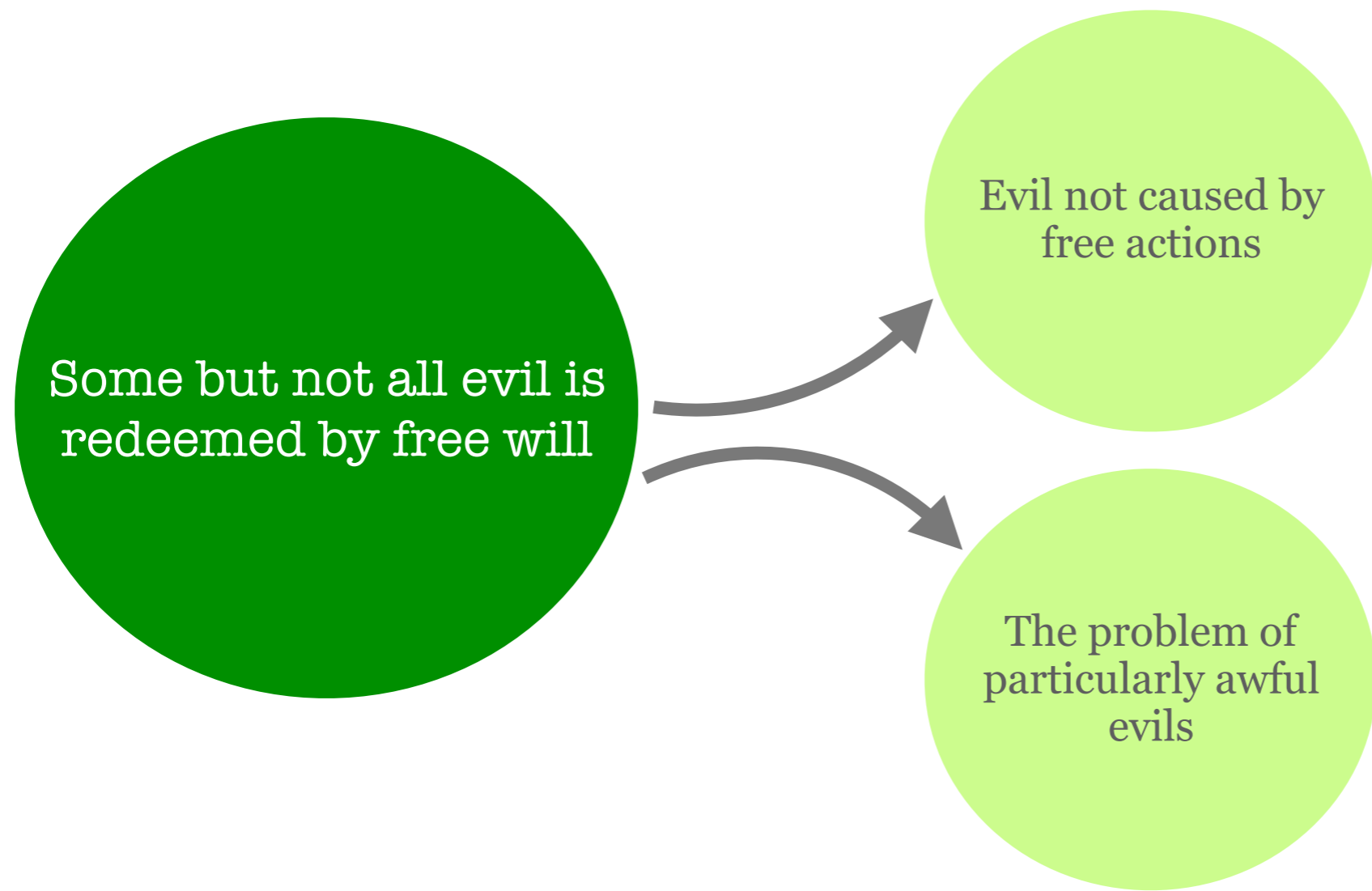
But suppose that this is right. This makes it somewhat mysterious why it should be so important that we have the ability to bring about evil. If God does not have this ability, and God is morally perfect, why should it be so important for us to have this ability? And it must be **very** important, given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







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 forbidden-for-God evil exists.

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 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.

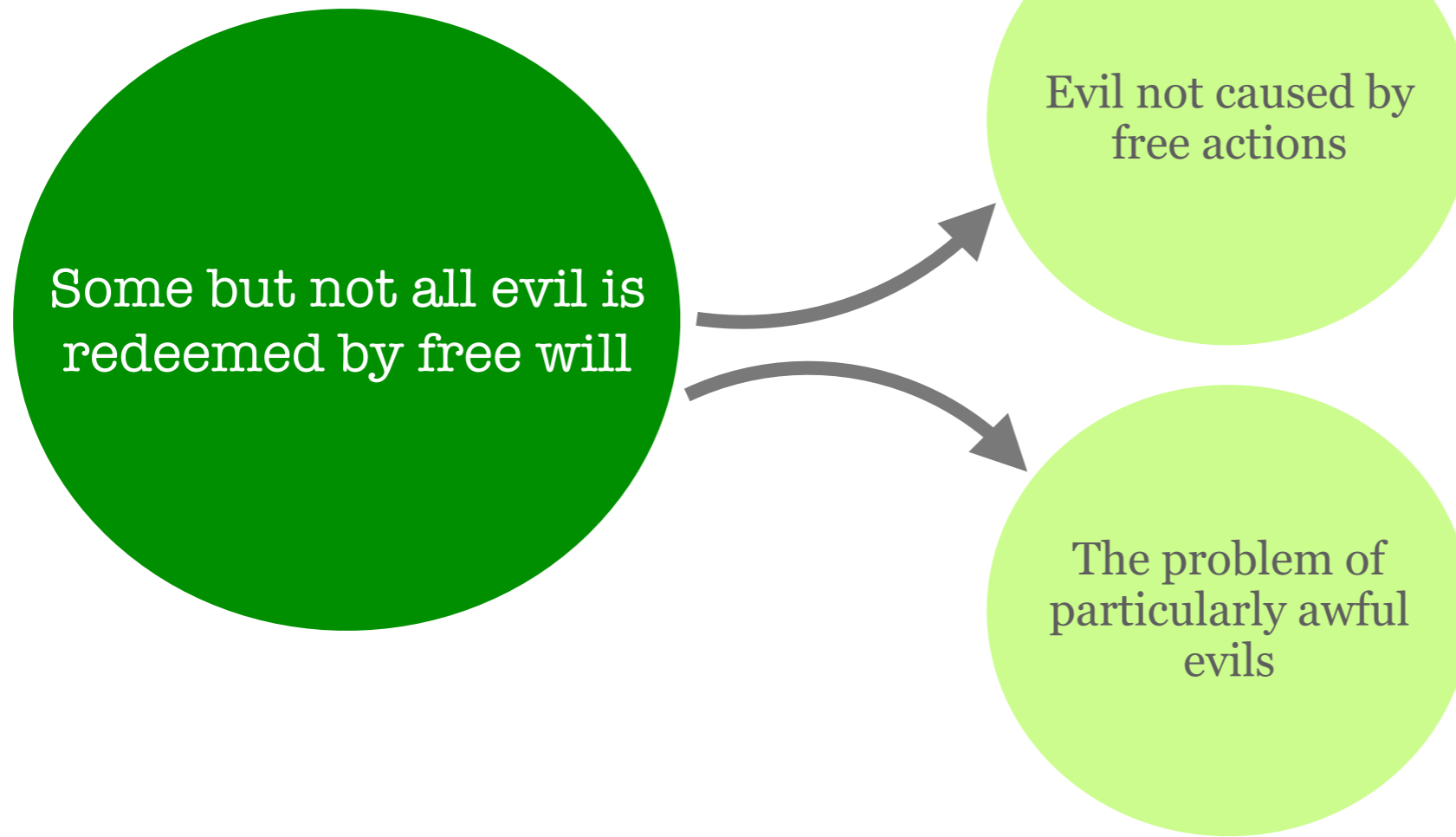
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Here is the gist of his response. In order for effective action to be possible, there must be regularities in nature. (Otherwise one would never know what the effects of one's actions would be.) In order for there to be regularities in nature, there must be laws of nature.

But perhaps, van Inwagen says, it is impossible for a universe governed by laws of nature to be such that no individuals, like the fawn, suffer.

So the reason why the fawn suffers is that a universe governed by laws is much better than one not so governed, and this good outweighs the badness of the fawn's suffering.

One might object that it **is** possible for a universe governed by laws of nature to include no cases like the fawn. But van Inwagen would ask:  
how do you know?



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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van Inwagen suggests that we reject (3).

This premise, he thinks, only seems plausible insofar as we accept some general claim like

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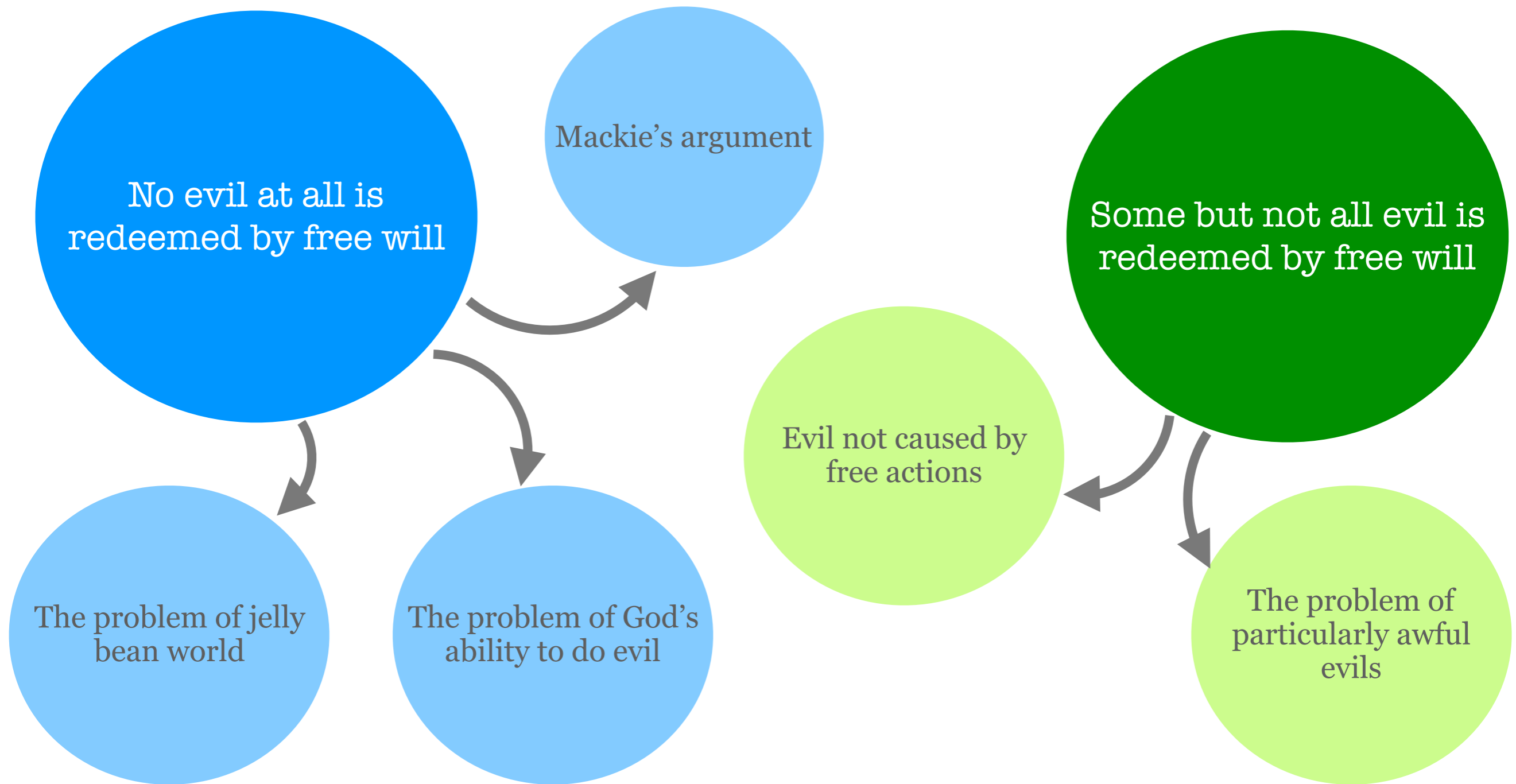
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His argument uses the example of a prison sentence. Suppose that someone is justly convicted of a crime, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Suppose further that this sentence is just.

Now suppose that you are given the chance to reduce the sentence by 1 day. If the above principle is true, it looks like you should.

But suppose we keep giving you this opportunity. Using the above principle, you will keep reducing the sentence, until it is 0 days in length.

But that seems like the wrong result. Is this a successful reductio of the principle with which we started?



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 (or free will plus some other assumptions explain the existence of evil in the world?