

Omnibenevolence,
omnipotence, and
evil



Last time, we discussed Anselm's conception of God as that being which has every property that it is better to have than not to have; and from this, we argued that God must have, at least, three properties.

omniscient

omnipotent

omnibenevolent

Last time we focused on problems which result from omnipotence alone; today we'll focus on problems which result from the combination of omnipotence with omnibenevolence. (Later in the course we'll return to problems involving omniscience.)

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 wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.



God is omnipotent.

God is wholly good.

Some evil exists.

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

If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

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:

If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

If God exists, then God is wholly good.

God exists.

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.

Some evil exists.

If God exists, then there is no evil.

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.



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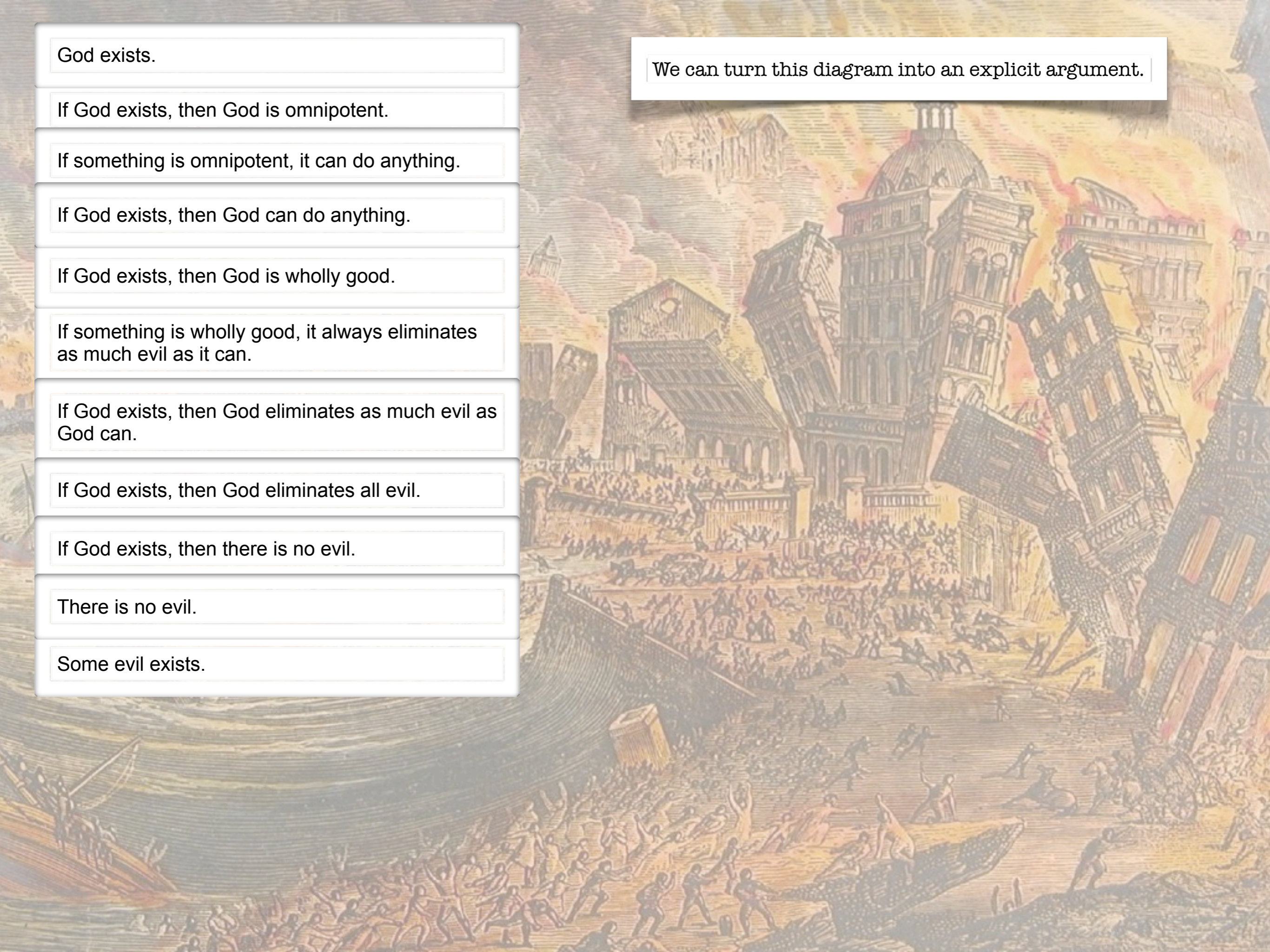
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If God exists, then there is no evil.

There is no evil.

Some evil exists.

We can turn this diagram into an explicit 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 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)

We can turn this diagram into an explicit argument.

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.

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.

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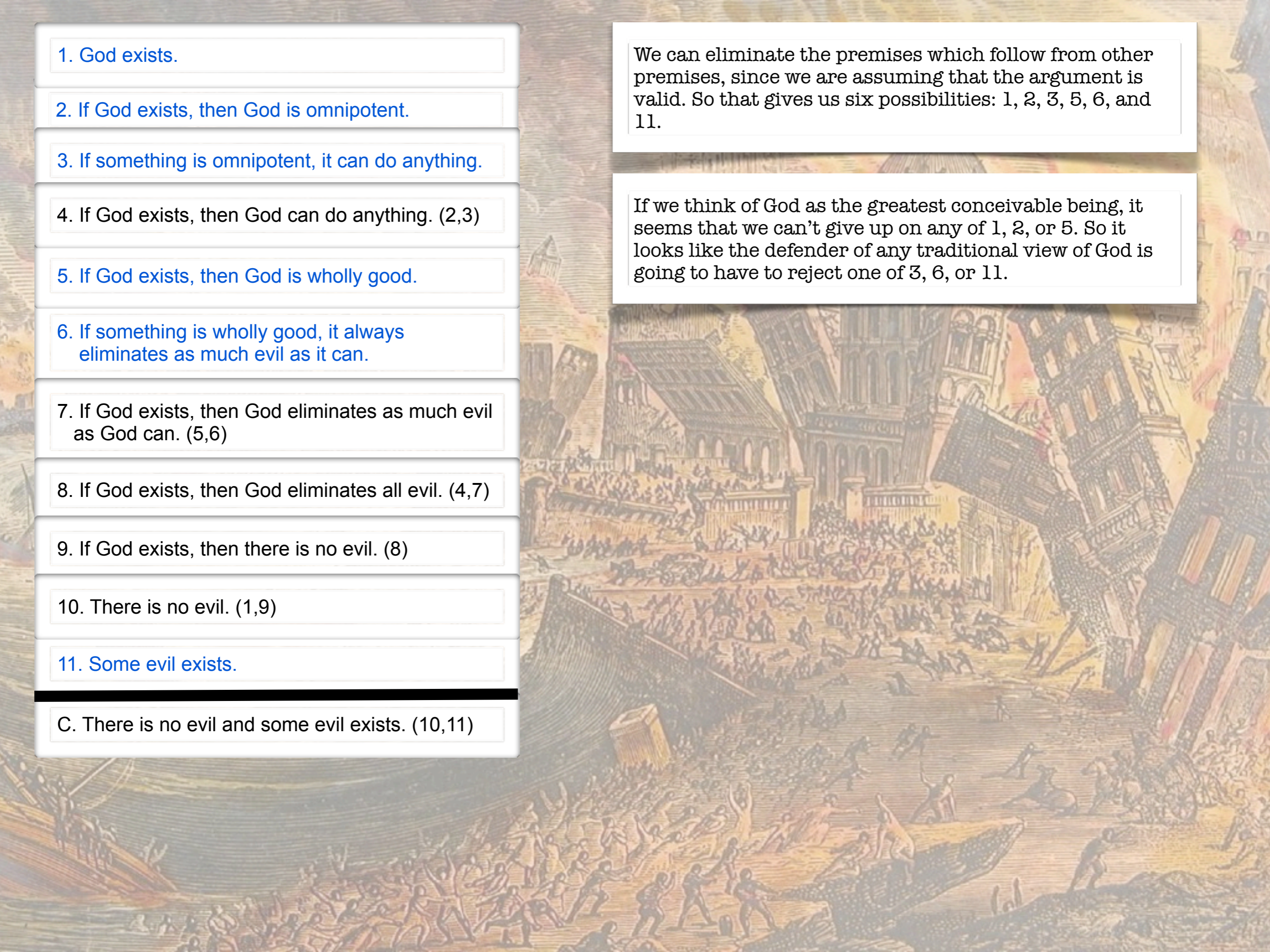
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If we think of God as the greatest conceivable being, it seems that we can't give up on any of 1, 2, or 5. So it looks like the defender of any traditional view of God is going to have to reject one of 3, 6, or 11.



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You might think that this is pretty easy: after all, haven't we already considered Aquinas' view that omnipotence is not the ability to do **anything**, but only the ability to bring about any possible state of affairs?

If we take this route, and adopt definition 3 of omnipotence, then it seems like we can safely reject premise 3 of our formulation of Mackie's argument.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

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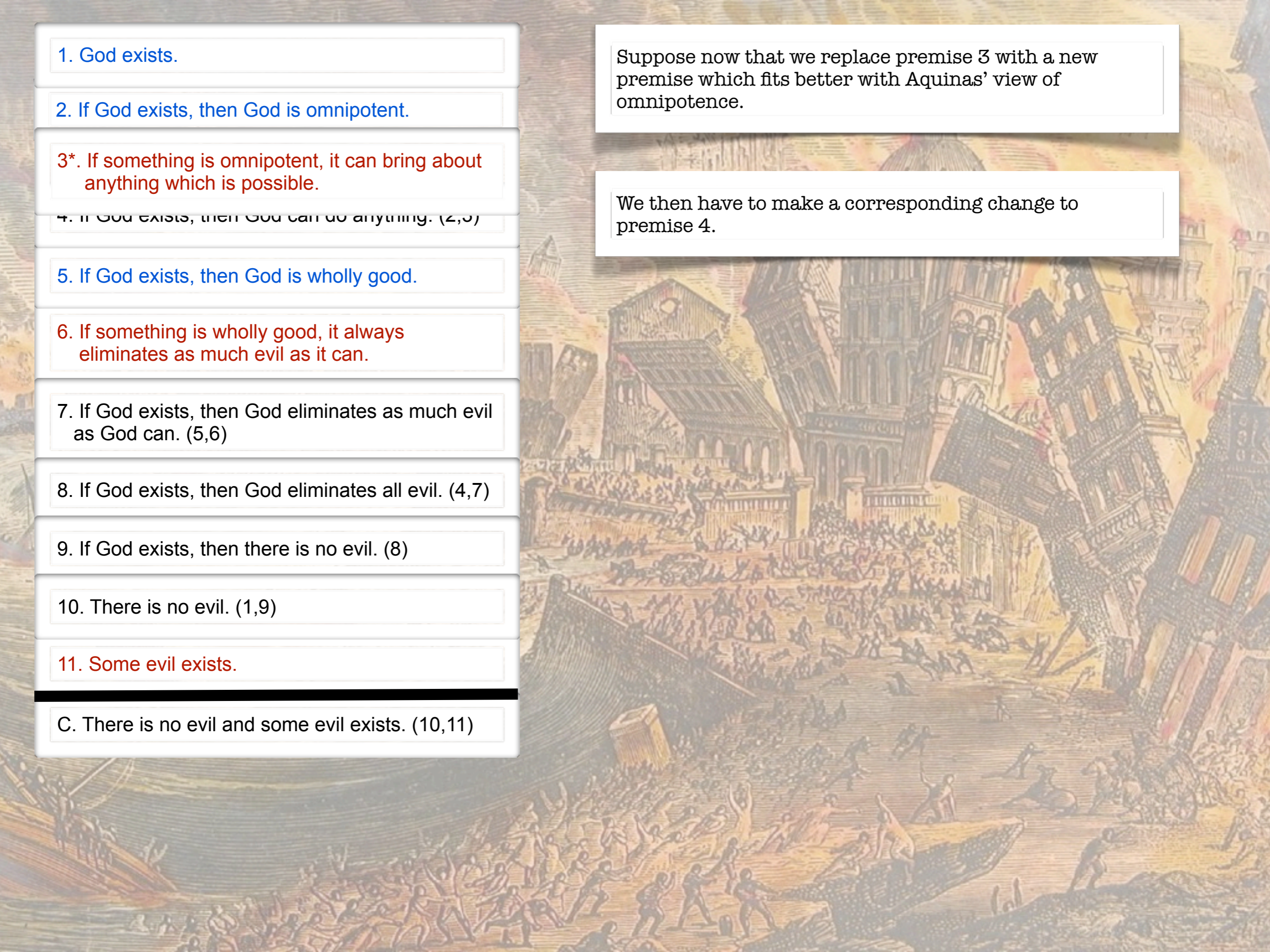
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Suppose now that we replace premise 3 with a new premise which fits better with Aquinas' view of omnipotence.

We then have to make a corresponding change to premise 4.



1. God exists.

2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

3*. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about anything which is possible.

4*. If God exists, then God can bring about anything which is possible. (2,3*)

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Is the resulting argument valid?

It is not, because 8 does not follow from 4* and 7.

What does follow from 4* and 7?

Something like:

8*. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil that it is possible to eliminate. (4*,7)

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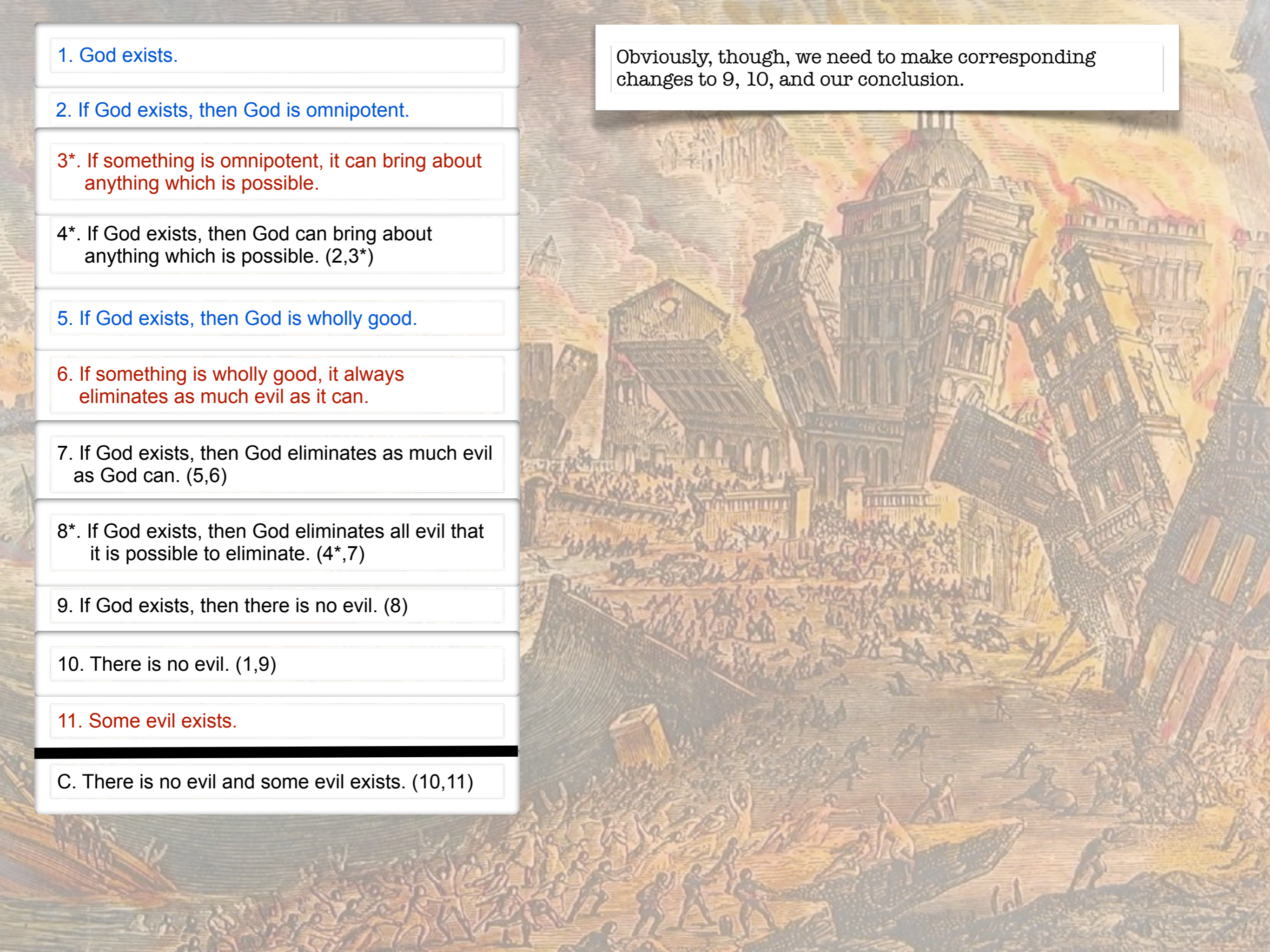
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Obviously, though, we need to make corresponding changes to 9, 10, and our conclusion.



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C. There is no evil that it is possible to eliminate and some evil exists. (10*,11)

Obviously, though, we need to make corresponding changes to 9, 10, and our conclusion.

The problem, though, is that our conclusion is no longer a contradiction. Does this mean that we have solved Mackie's problem? If you were Mackie, how would you respond to this objection to the argument?

It seems like Mackie has a pretty obvious response: he can just make a corresponding change to premise 11 to restore the contradiction:

11*. Some evil exists that it is possible to eliminate.

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4*. If God exists, then God can bring about anything which is possible. (2,3*)

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C. There is and is not some evil that it is possible to eliminate (10*,11)

So it looks like Aquinas' view of omnipotence does not provide much of a response to Mackie; he can simply reformulate his argument by assuming, not just that there is evil, but also that there is evil which possibly does not exist.

But, you might ask, is this new assumption – premise 11* in our argument – true?

I think that it is pretty hard to deny. The Catechism, for example, says:

But why did God not create a world so perfect that no evil could exist in it? With infinite power God could always create something better. (§310)

It notably does not say that God does not create a world without evil because it is impossible for there not to be evil; it simply grants that there is evil, and that God could have prevented the existence of evil, and then considers the question of why God might have done this.

Mackie, though, thinks that any answer to this question will ultimately end up denying either premise 2 or premise 5, and hence denying that God is omnipotent or denying that God is wholly good.

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The Catechism suggests the following as a partial explanation of the existence of evil in the world:

311. Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love. They can therefore go astray. Indeed, they have sinned. Thus has moral evil, incommensurably more harmful than physical evil, entered the world. God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it, however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures and, mysteriously, knows how to derive good from it:

“For almighty God. . ., because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself.” (St. Augustine)

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There are two main ideas in this passage: (i) that certain sorts of evils exist because of God's desire that we have free will; and (ii) that God would never permit evils unless he could bring good out of them.

Point (ii) might suggest the following answer to the question of why God might permit evil:

God permits evil because it is a means to good.

Suppose that this is true. What premise in Mackie's argument would this make false?

It seems to falsify premise 6. Surely even a perfectly good thing might permit some evil to occur if it is a means to a good which outweighs that evil.

But there are two special problems with applying this style of explanation for the existence of evil to the case of God.

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But there are two special problems with applying this style of explanation for the existence of evil to the case of God.

1. Presumably God could have prevented not just some evils, but any evil. (God could have decided not to create anything other than God, in which case there would presumably be no evil.) But that means that we must find, for **every** evil that has ever occurred, some good that came out of it which outweighs that evil. Can we?

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!

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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?

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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?

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It looks like the idea that God sometimes allows evil as a means to good might well be true – but that it fails as an attempt to explain the existence of the kind of evil we find in the world.

Let's see where we are.

To give an adequate response to Mackie's argument, it looks like we will have to reject one of 3*, 6, and 11*. Since 3* and 11* look pretty hard to deny, premise 6 emerges as the key premise of Mackie's argument.

Moreover, if we are to respond to Mackie's argument by rejecting premise 6, we must do the following difficult thing:

The challenge: provide an explanation of why a wholly good being would permit evil which applies to every kind of evil that we find in our world.

For suppose that we gave an explanation which applied to some, but not all evils. Then we could just revise Mackie's argument to apply to the evils which we had failed to explain, and the problem would remain.

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Next time, we'll consider what many consider to be the most promising attempt to answer that challenge: the idea that God permits evil "because he respects the freedom of his creatures." As we'll see, the issues which arise in connection with the "free will defense" will lead us back into questions about the nature of God's omnipotence and goodness.