God, Suffering and Faith

Can we prove that God exists?

If God exists, why is there suffering in the world?

Can we do away with faith?

Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*

Two Types of Proofs of God's Existence

- **A PRIORI PROOF**: It establishes the existence of God **given the concept of God alone**

  An <u>a priori statement</u> is one whose truth or falsity depends on thought alone and does <u>not</u> depend on sensory experience, data collection or observation

- **A POSTERIORI PROOF**: It establishes the existence of God **given our sensory experience, data collection or observation**

  An <u>a posteriori statement</u> is one whose truth or falsity depends on sensory experience, data collection or observation

Examples of A Priori Statements

A priori TRUE

- Triangles have three sides
- 4+4=8
- Bachelors are unmarried

A priori FALSE

- Triangles have four sides
- 4+4=5
- Bachelors are married

Examples of A Posteriori Statements

A posteriori TRUE

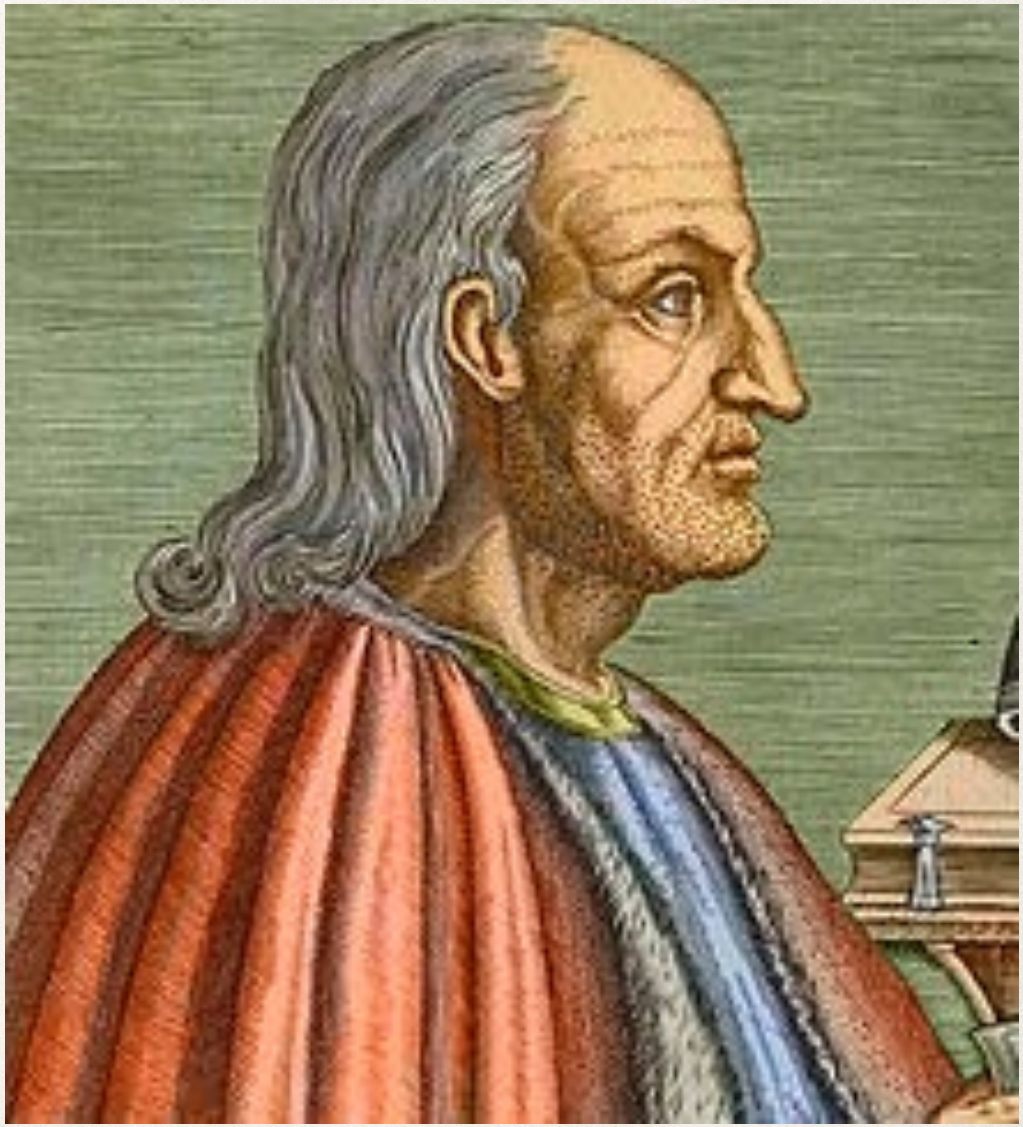
- Water flows downhill
- There are more than five billion people on earth today
- Standing under the rain with no umbrella makes you wet

A posteriori FALSE

- Water flows uphill
- There are less than five billion people on earth today
- Standing under the rain with no umbrella makes you dry

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033—1099)

"For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand"



Anselm's Ontological Argument

"Lord . . . we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

. . . The fool has said in his heart, there is no God (Psalms xiv. 1). But when this very fool hears of God, i.e. a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, he understands what he hears.

Even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived, at least, exists in the mind.

But that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the mind alone. (For, suppose it exists in the mind alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which would be something greater.)

So, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the mind alone, it would be something than which something greater can be conceived.

But this is impossible, so that there exists—in reality—something than which nothing greater can be conceived."

Reconstructing Anselm's Argument

Define God as the being than which no greater can be conceived (=BNGCBC).

1.By definition, nothing greater than God can be conceived

2. Suppose God (=BNGCBC) does not exist.

A. If God does not exist, something greater than it can be conceived.

B. So, something greater than God (=BNGCBC) can be conceived.

3. But nothing greater than God can be conceived because, by definition, God is BNGCBC. So, we cannot suppose that God does not exist.

NOTA BENE:
Step 2 assumes that an **existent being** is *greater than* (more perfect than) a **non-existent being**. That is, if you conceive of *God-as-non-existent*, you can conceive of something greater than it, namely you can conceive of *God-as-existent*.

Think of the greatest concept ever
Now imagine that it doesn't exist
Not so great now, is it?
So if what you're thinking of is really so great, it must exist!

Anselm's Ontological Argument Made Simple

God is TTWNGCBC: The greatest thing imaginable

→ God exists in the mind (as an idea).

→ God either exists only as an idea OR as an idea **and** in reality

→ If an idea could be real, it could be greater.

→ Suppose God exists only as an idea...

→ Then God could have been greater than he is.

→ A greater being than God is possible.

→ Something greater than the greatest imaginable thing is possible?!

→ Contradiction!!

→ False that God only exists in mind.

→ God exists in reality.

→

Simple!

The Abstract Form of Anselm's Argument

1. By definition, nothing greater than God can be conceived.

2. Suppose God does not exist.

   A. If God does not exist, something greater than it can be conceived.

   B. So, something greater than God can be conceived.

3. But, by definition, nothing greater than God can be conceived, so we cannot suppose God does not exist.

1. By definition, X is true

2. Suppose Y is true

   A. If Y is true, then X is false

   B. So, X is false

3. But X cannot be false, because by definition, X is true. So, Y must be false.

Anselm's Challenge for the Atheist

A. *Either* the atheist understands the word `God' (namely, the being than which nothing greater can be conceived)

B. *Or* the atheist does not understand the word 'God'

If (A), the atheist has to admit God exists by Anselm's proof.

If (B), the atheist cannot meaningfully deny God's existence.

So, **either** God exists **or** denying its existence is meaningless.

Is Anselm's Proof A PRIORI or A POSTERIORI?

A priori. It contains no appeal to our sensory experience, data collection or observation of the world.

Two Objections to Anselm's Ontological Argument

1. Is God Thinkable or Conceivable?

"The Faithful say that God knows absolutely everything, and that there are no limits to what he can do. [However,] if God knows everything, then nobody could construct a box so that God doesn't know what it contains, whereas if there were no limits to what God can do, then he could construct a box so that nobody knows what it contains."

Bill Wallace – From the 'Discussion Forum' on Richard Dawkins' website.

This observation suggests that the concept of God is hard for us humans to conceive, grasp and understand. If so, Anselm's argument which presupposes an understanding of the concept of God is in trouble.

Anselm's Response — How We Can Make Sense of a Being Than Which No Greater Can Be Conceived

"….by raising our thoughts from lesser goods to greater goods, we are quite capable of forming an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought …

Who, for example, is unable to think . . . that if something that has a beginning and end is good, then something that has a beginning but never ceases to exist is much better?

And … something that has neither beginning nor end is better still?

...So there is in fact a way to form an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought."

2. Gaunilo's Objection

Consider the Perfect Island (=an island than which no greater/better island can be conceived).

Following Anselm's reasoning, it follows that a *non-existent* Perfect Island would be less perfect than an *existent* Perfect Island.

So, the Perfect Island must exist. (*Absurd!*)

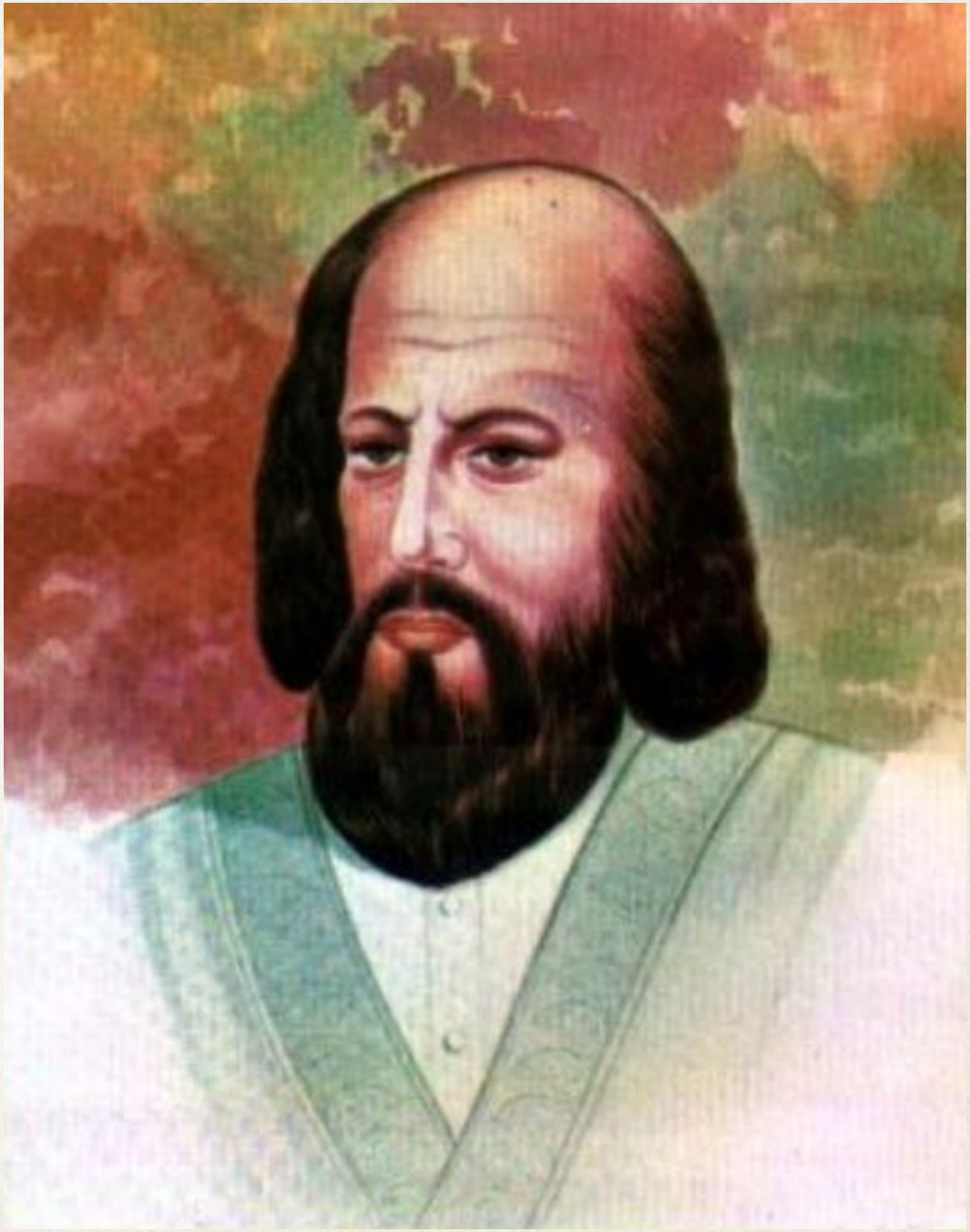
Since this admittedly absurd piece of reasoning mirrors Anselm's proof of God's existence, Anselm's proof must be absurd, as well.

How Did Anselm Respond to Gaunilo?

Anselm's proof only applies to the being than which nothing greater can be conceived, not to any being.

A Second Argument for God's Existence: the Cosmological Argument

Al-Gazhali (1022—1111)



Al-Gazhali's Argument

1. Everything that has a beginning of its existence must have a cause of its existence.

2. **The universe has a beginning of its existence.**

3.So, the universe must have a cause if its existence.

4. If the universe has a cause of its existence, its cause must be God.

5.So, God must exist.

St. Thomas of Aquinas (1225 – 1274)

"To those who have faith no explanation is necessary. To those without faith, no explanation is possible."

The Cosmological Argument

1. Some things are undergoing change in the world.

2. Anything that is undergoing change must have a cause of its change.

3. Such a cause, if it is itself undergoing change, must have a cause for its change as well.

4. But this cannot go on forever, otherwise there would be no first cause and no change at all.

5. So, there must be a first cause of change, where the first cause is not itself caused by something else.

6. That first cause we call God.

Is Thomas' Argument A PRIORI or A POSTERIORI?

A posteriori. The proof beings with an empirical observation, namely that some things are undergoing change in this world.

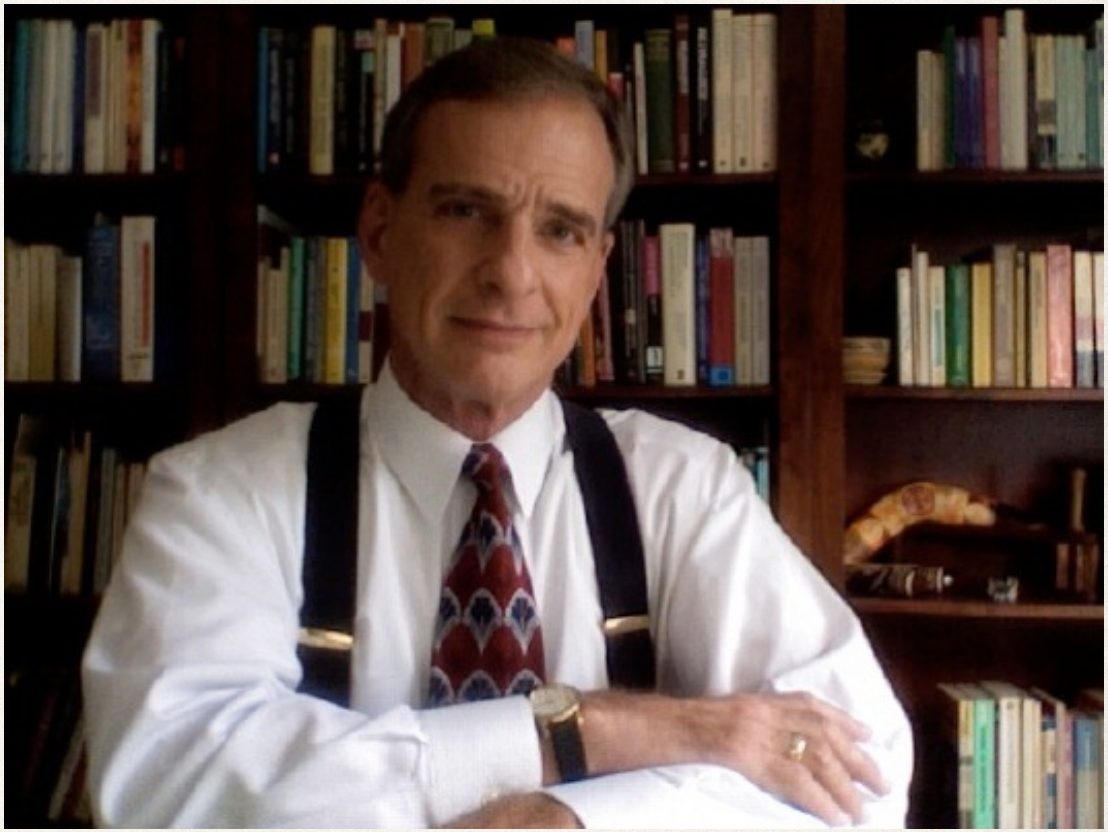
Key Ideas in the Argument

Everything that undergoes change must have a cause

There cannot be an infinite regress of causes, otherwise change itself would be impossible

Why Cannot There Be an Infinite Regress of Causes?

William Lane Craig on Why There Cannot be an Infinite Regress of Causes



watch the video below
up to minute 3:25

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeKavDdRVIg

Craig's Argument Against an Infinite Regress of Causes

1. An infinite regress of causes is impossible **because** there cannot be an infinite number of past events.

2. There cannot be an infinite number of past events **because** physical infinity is contradictory.

3. Physical infinity is contradictory **because** if you subtract infinity from infinity you can get both a <u>finite</u> number of things as well as an <u>infinite</u> number of things.

Craig on Why "Physical Infinity" Is Contradictory

First, suppose there are an infinite number of past events, each numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.

Next, subtract an <u>infinite</u> number of events from the given infinite number of events.

Option 1: Subtract the even numbered events. *Result*: The remaining events are still infinite (i.e. all the odd events).

Option 2: Subtract the events greater than 100. *Result*: the remaining events are finite (i.e. the events up to 100).

Craig here relies on the mathematical fact that the ***even numbers*** are **infinite** and ***the numbers greater than 100*** are also **infinite**.

Infinity *minus* infinity equals infinity.

Infinity *minus* infinity equals "finity".

That's contradictory!

But all Craig's argument seems to show is that "infinity" is something counterintuitive

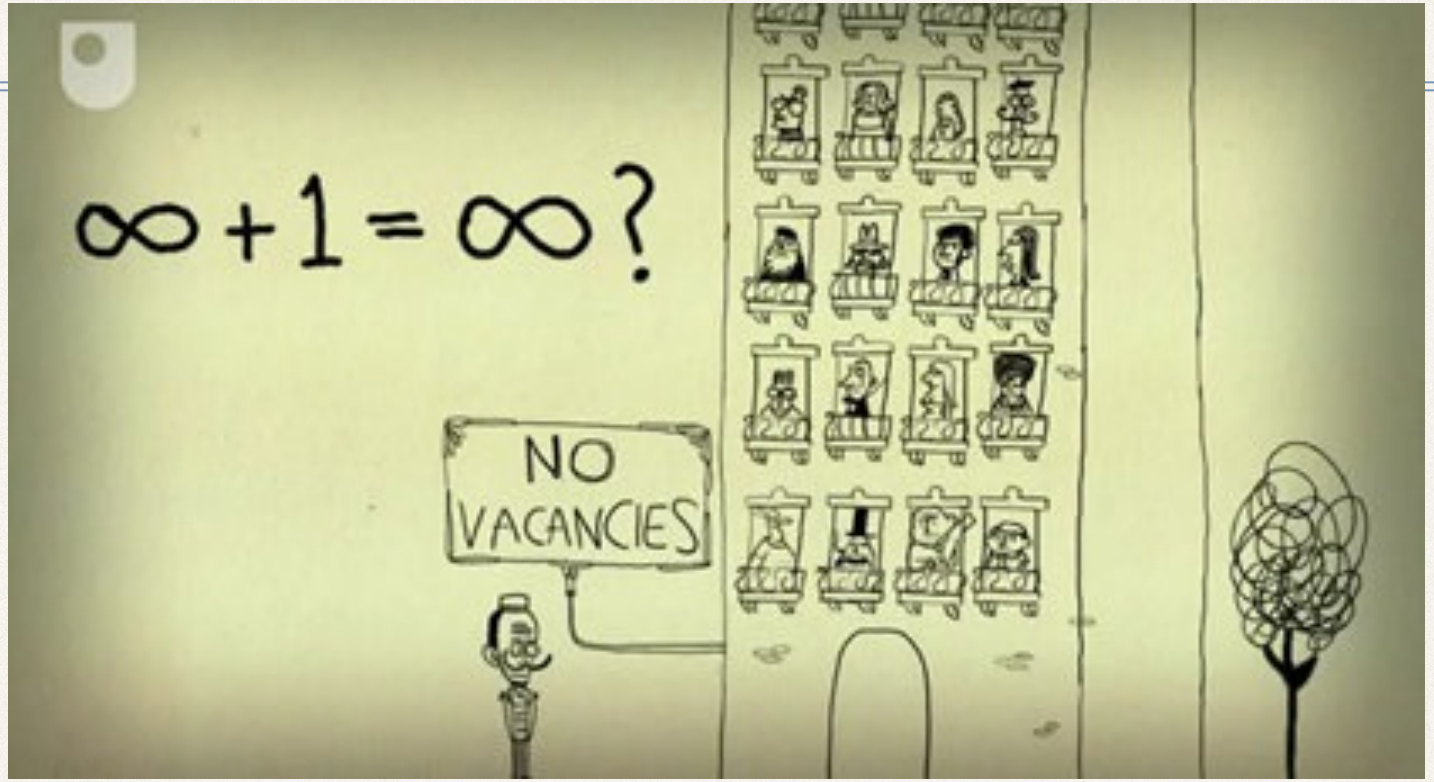
His argument does not seem to show that "physical infinity" is flat out contradictory.

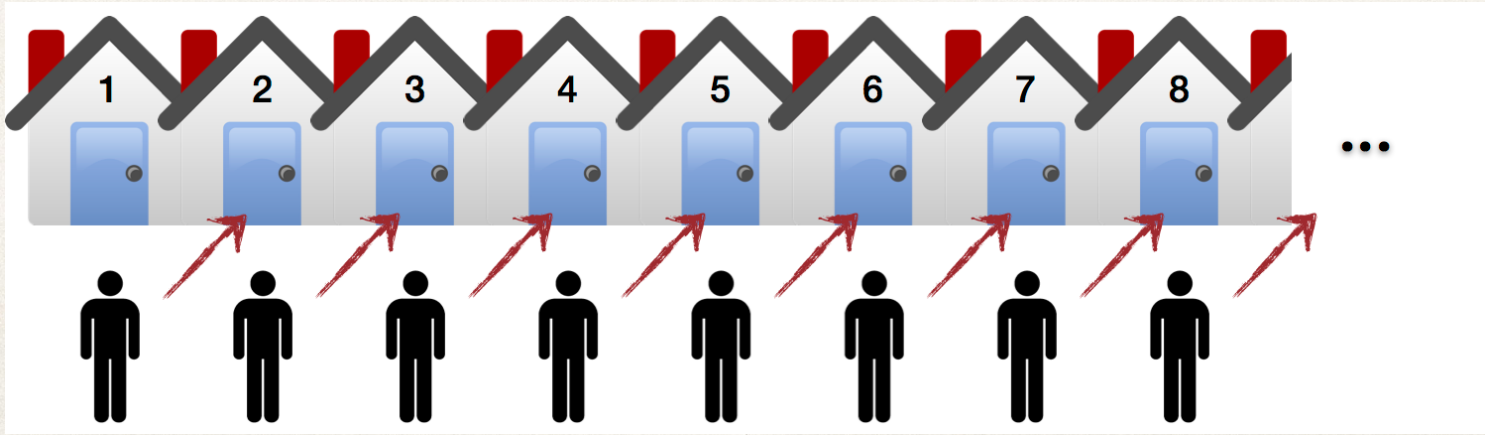
I'll let you decide for yourself

Another Way to Look at the Counterintuitive Nature of Infinity

Hilbert's Infinite Hotel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faQBrAQ8714





Next Topic—*If There is a God, Why is There Suffering in this World?*

Epicurus (341-270 BC)

The Problem of Evil

Epicurus (341-270 BCE) philosopher and teacher

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?
Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?"

An Explanation of Evil that Came Up in Class

"Good" can be understood only in opposition to "evil". If there is no "evil", there would be no "good" either.

A Solution to the Problem of Evil—
Two Principles of Reality, one Good and One Evil

According to many religions, there are two principles of reality.

For example:

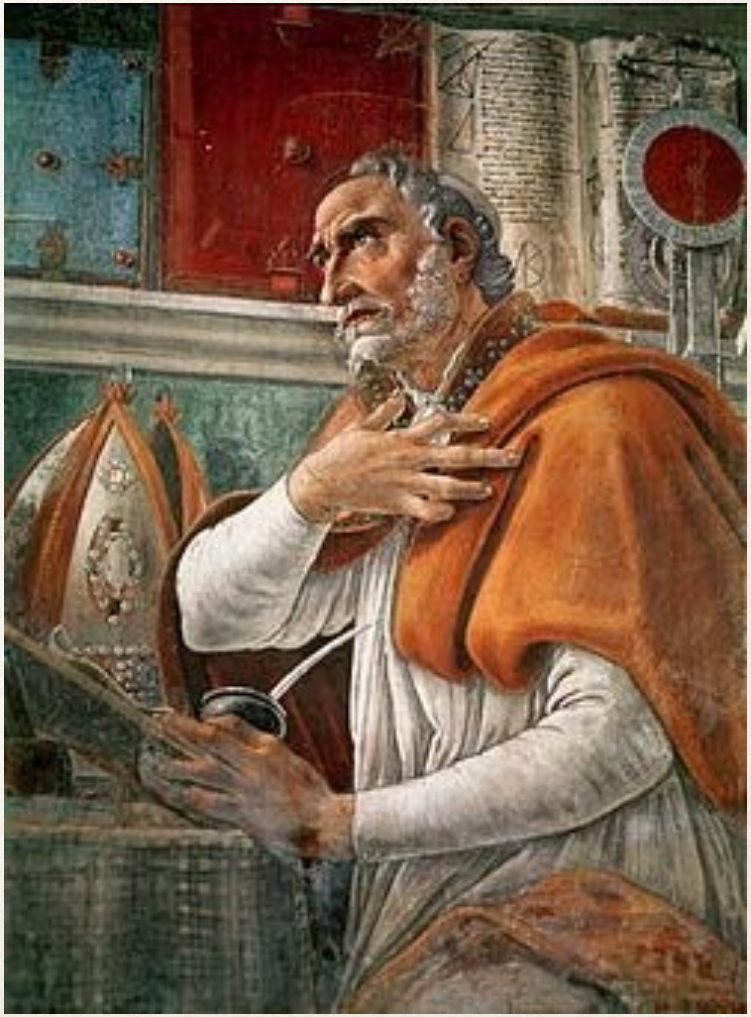
- *Yin* and *Yang* in Taoism
- *Apollus* and *Dionysius* in Ancient Greek religion
- *Good* and *Evil* in Manicheism

If there are two principles, evil and suffering are explained as originating from the "evil principle".

Why Doesn't the "Two Principle Solution" Work?

St. Augustine against the "two principle solution":

1. Suppose that there are two principles of reality.
2. A principle of reality is just like a God. So, a principle of reality, by definition, is unlimited.
3. But if there are two principles, they cannot be unlimited.
4. Thus, there cannot be two principles of reality.



But If There is Only One God, Where Does Evil Come From?

The Problem of Evil Formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas

It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed.

But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness.

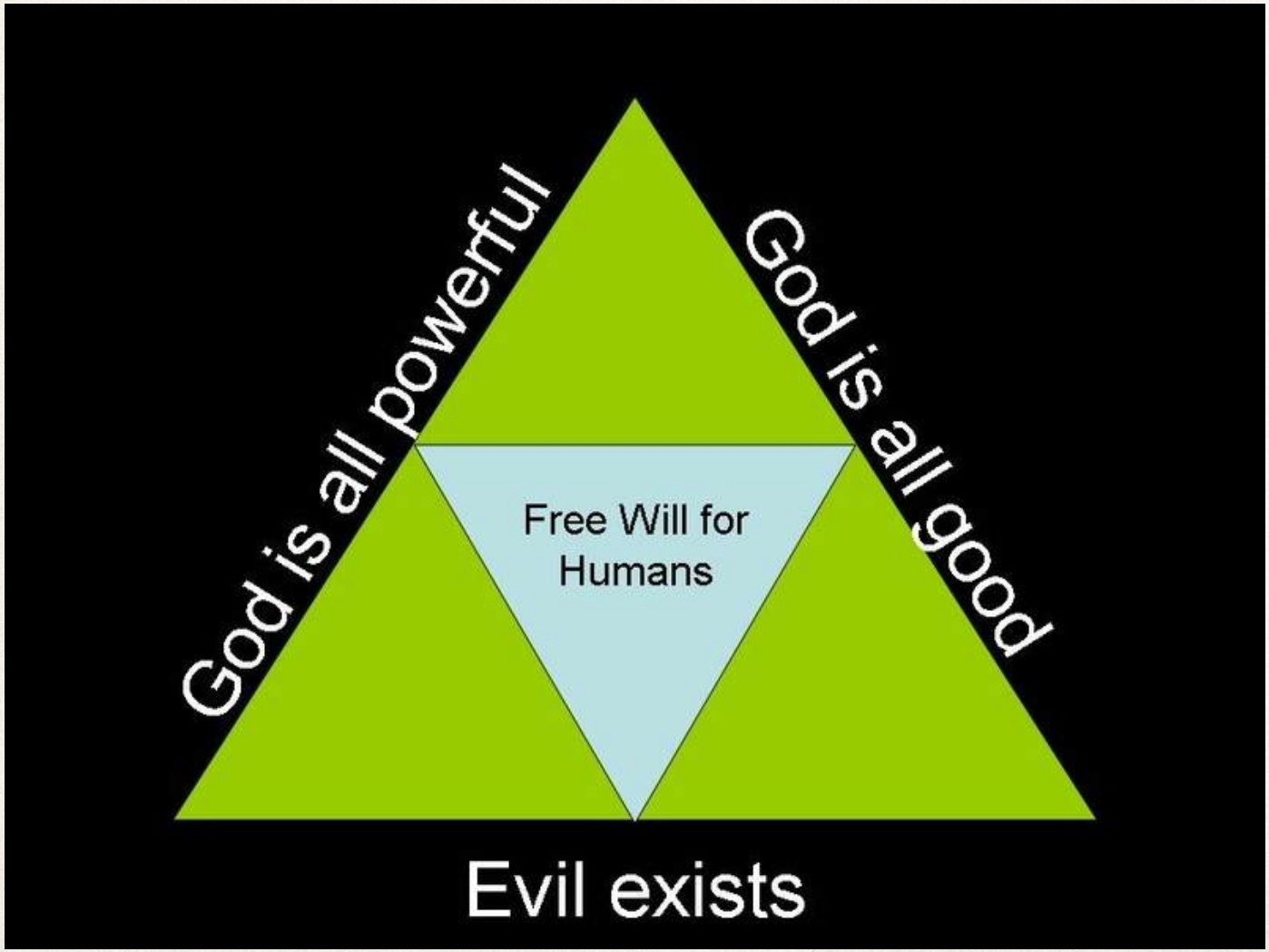
If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world.

Therefore God does not exist.

Thomas Aquinas' Response—*Inscrutability of God*

Response: *That is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.*

The “Free Will” Response



*What if there is no such a thing as **free will** as discussed earlier in the course?*

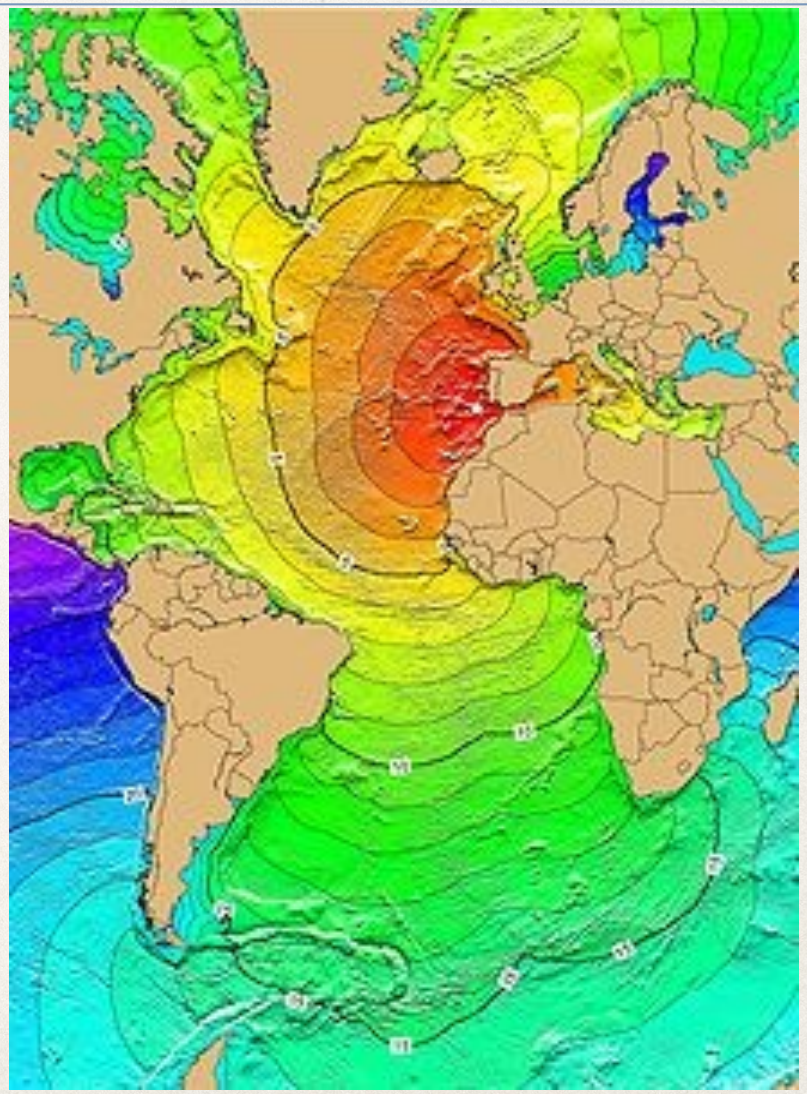
Two Challenges

Challenge 1:
Suffering caused by human beings against other human beings

Challenged 2:
Suffering caused by natural disasters

Can the "Free Will Response" address Challenge 2?

The 1755 Lisbon Earthquake



The city of Lisbon was almost entirely destroyed.

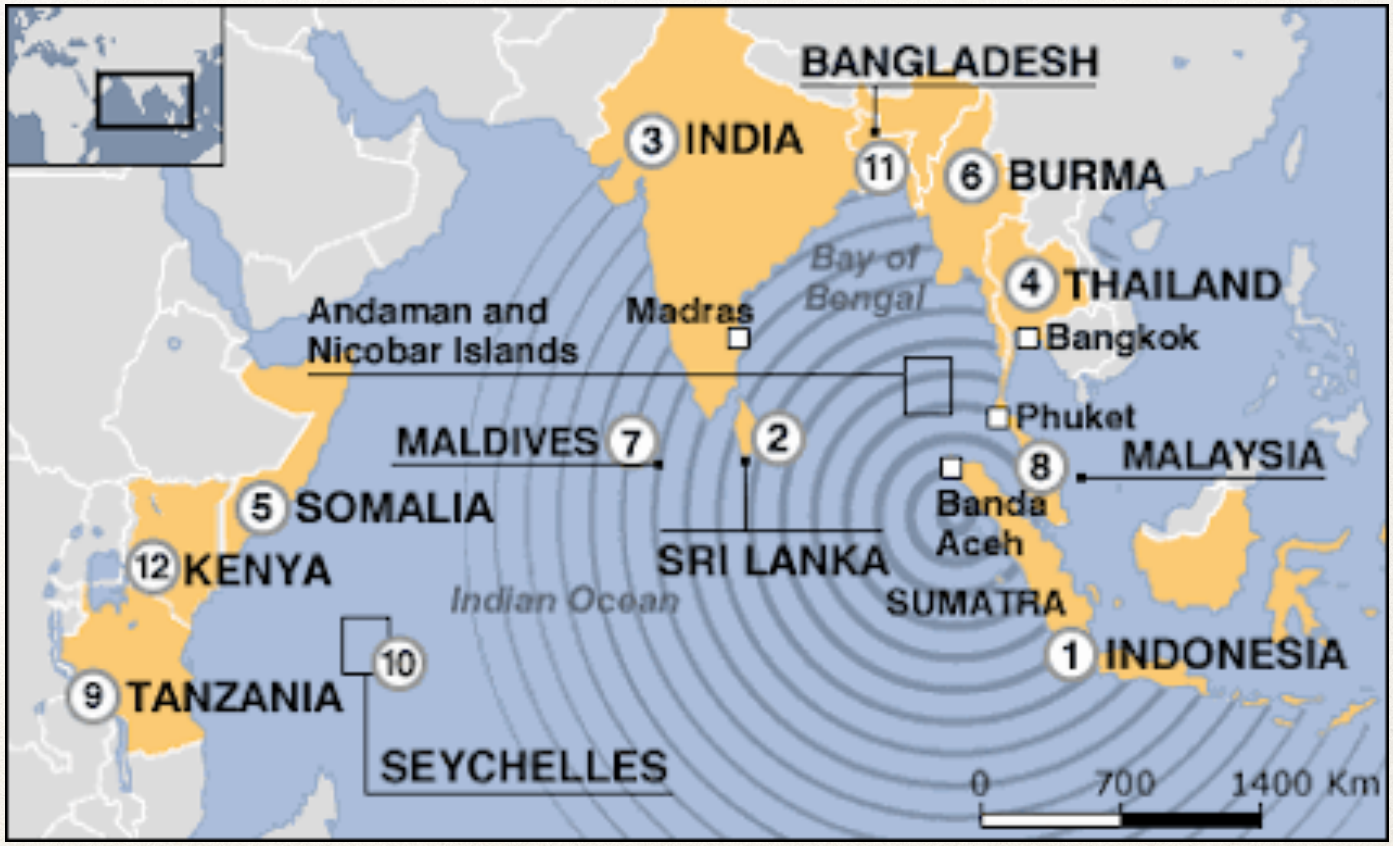
In 1755, Lisbon had a population of 200,000 people. Approximately, 30,000-50,000 people died, including people living in surrounding cities.

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

250,000-280,000 causalities

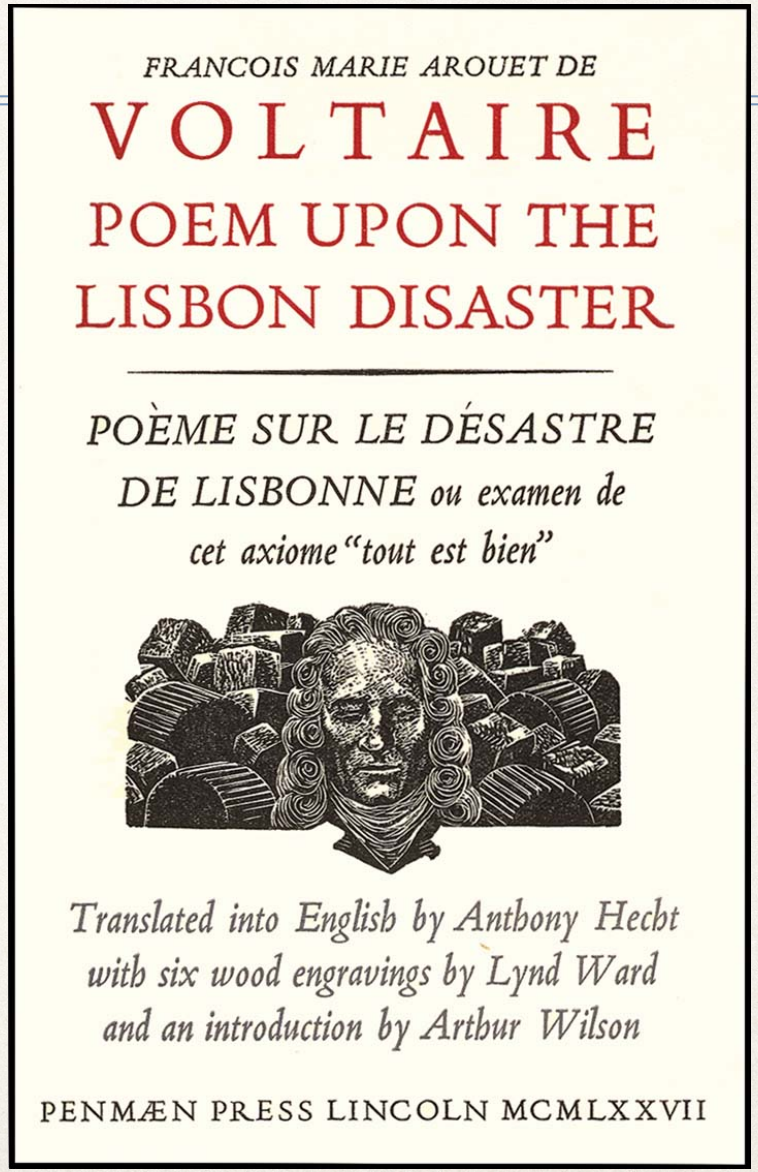
See BBC Article "Tsunami among World's Worst Disaster"

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4128509.stm



Voltaire's Poem on The Lisbon Earthquake

French philosopher of the Enlightenment (1694-1778)



FRANCOIS MARIE AROUET DE

VOLTAIRE

POEM UPON THE LISBON DISASTER

POÈME SUR LE DÉSASTRE DE LISBONNE ou examen de cet axiome "tout est bien"

Translated into English by Anthony Hecht with six wood engravings by Lynd Ward and an introduction by Arthur Wilson

PENMÆN PRESS LINCOLN MCMLXXVII

Quotations from the Poem

We cannot learn why

Endless disorder, chaos of distress,

Must mix our little pleasures thus with pain;

Nor why the guiltless suffer all this woe

In common with the most abhorrent guilt.

'T is mockery to tell me all is well.

Quotations from the Poem

What is the verdict of the vastest mind?

Silence: the book of fate is closed to us.

Man is a stranger to his own research;

He knows not whence he comes, nor whither goes.

Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,

Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.

How Does a Believer in One God Justify Natural Disasters?

Responses to Problem Of Evil

1. *Two Gods, one good and one evil*

- **But** there cannot be two Infinite, all-powerful Gods

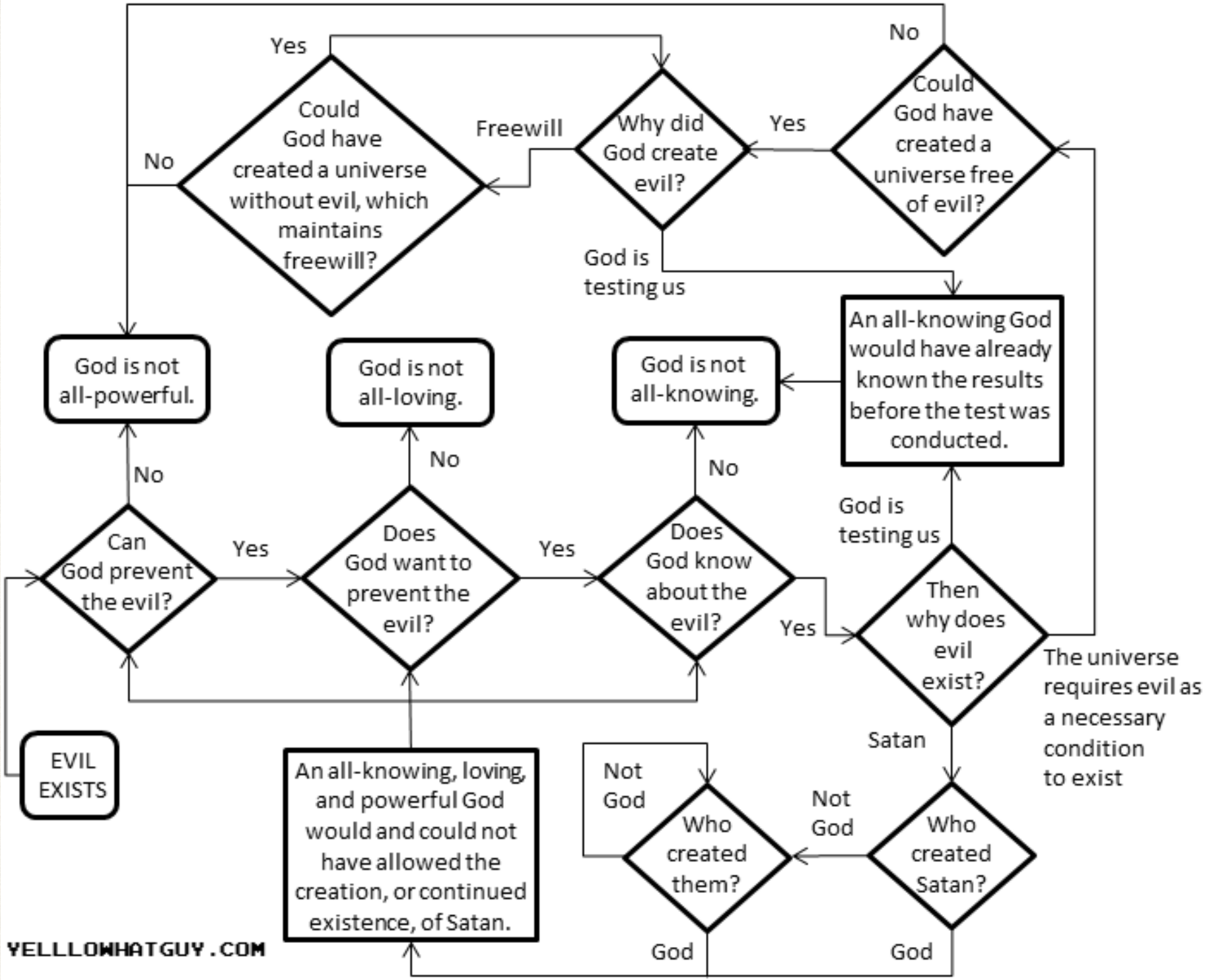
2. *There is no "good" without "evil"; we need to experience "evil" to appreciate "good"*

- **But** this does not explain how and why "evil" came about

3. *God gave us free will*

- **But** free will does not explain "evil" as a result of natural disasters
- **But** if God gave us "free will", didn't He create "evil" indirectly?
- **But** how could God create evil (even indirectly) if God is entirely good? Shouldn't we admit that "evil" was already in God so that God is (partly) evil?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL



Next Topic — Can We Do Away With Faith?

Clifford's *Ethics of Belief*

A Shipowner and His Ship

–Clifford, The Ethics of Belief, PART I

"A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship […] Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections […] He would put his trust in Providence […] In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy"

What Happened Next?

"[…] he watched her (=*the ship's*) departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales."

–Clifford, The Ethics of Belief, PART I

Shall We Hold the Shipowner Accountable for the Disaster?

The Shipowner Had No Right to Believe Things on Insufficient Evidence

"What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men […] he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him […]* And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise, yet inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it."

–Clifford, The Ethics of Belief, PART I

The Duty To Question and Doubt Everything

"No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe. It is true that this duty is a hard one, and the doubt which comes out of it is often a very bitter thing. […] We feel much happier and more secure when we think we know precisely what to do […] we naturally do not like to find that we are really ignorant and powerless, that we have to begin again at the beginning […] It is the sense of power attached to a sense of knowledge that makes men desirous of believing, and afraid of doubting."

–Clifford, The Ethics of Belief, PART I

But <u>**Why**</u> Should We Doubt and Question What We Believe?

Bad Consequences Result from Believing Without Evidence

"Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self- control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing evidence. We all suffer severely enough from the maintenance and support of false beliefs […] But a greater and wider evil arises when the credulous character is maintained and supported, when a habit of believing for unworthy reasons is fostered and made permanent […] The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery."

–Clifford, The Ethics of Belief, PART I

Clifford's Main Claim—

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

But if we accept Clifford's claim, do we have sufficient evidence to believe in God?

William James' *Will to Believe*

It is Advisable to Keep Doubting and Questioning in the Realm Science and Philosophy

"The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Roentgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand"

–James, The Will to Believe

But Can We Keep Doubting About Everything?

We Cannot Keep Doubting in Matters of Religion

"We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good. […] We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way if religion be untrue, we lose the good, if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. . ."

–James, The Will to Believe

Fear

(That Religion is False)

versus

Hope

(That Religion is True)

—

Which Should We Follow?

"To preach skepticism to us as a duty until "sufficient evidence" for religion be found is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true."

–James, The Will to Believe

Weighing Two Risks — Pascal's Wager

	I. God exists	II. God does not exist
i. I believe	A. Infinite gain minus finite loss	B. Finite loss
ii. I do not believe	C. Finite gain minus infinite loss	D. Finite gain

A. If we believe in God, we run the risk of being wrong. God might not exist.

This risk involves a **finite loss.**

B. If we do not believe in God, we run the risk of being wrong. God might exist after all.

This risk involves an **infinite loss**, for example, the loss of eternal life.

The second risk is greater than the first, so it's reasonable to believe in God.

The Atheist's Rebuttal