According to J. L. Mackie, the following propositions are inconsistent:

1. “[T]here is a God” (200).
2. “God is omnipotent” (200).
3. “God is wholly good” (200).
4. “[E]vil exists” (200).
5. “[G]ood is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can” (201).
6. “[T]here are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do” (201).

If Mackie is correct, then anyone who wishes to accept all six propositions has a problem—a logical problem. The problem can be solved by “giv[ing] up at least one of the propositions that constitute it” (201). Mackie calls a solution of this sort an “adequate” solution:

If you are prepared to say that God is not wholly good [3], or not quite omnipotent [2], or that evil does not exist [4], or that good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists [5], or that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do [6], then the problem of evil will not arise for you (201).

According to Mackie, most theists are unwilling to say any of these things. Instead, they “explicitly maintain all the constituent propositions, but implicitly reject at least one of them in the course of the argument that explains away the problem of evil” (202). Mackie calls these attempted explanations “fallacious solutions” (202) and proposes “to examine some of [them], and to exhibit their fallacies in detail” (203). The “fallacious solutions” include the following:

- “Good cannot exist without evil” or “Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good” (203).
  We might call this “the Inseparability Solution,” for it says that good and evil are logically, ontologically, or epistemologically inseparable. “It is sometimes suggested that evil is necessary as a counterpart to good, that if there were no evil there could be no good either, and that this solves the problem of evil” (203).

  - **Mackie:** “[I]t sets a limit to what God can do, saying that God cannot create good without simultaneously creating evil, and this means either that God is not omnipotent or that there are some limits to what an omnipotent thing can do”

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1. J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind*, n.s., 64 (April 1955): 200-12. John Leslie (J. L.) Mackie was born in Sydney, Australia, on 24 or 25 August 1917 and died on 12 December 1981, at the age of 64. His father was born in Scotland and his mother in Australia. This essay was published when Mackie was 37 years old. All page references are to the original version.

2. To say that a set of (two or more) propositions is inconsistent is to say that, logically speaking, they cannot all be true, from which it follows that at least one of them is false.
Mackie: “[T]his solution denies that evil is opposed to good in our original sense. If good and evil are counterparts [as opposed to opposites], a good thing will not ‘eliminate evil as far as it can’ [5]” (204).

Mackie: “[I]f there were a . . . requirement for evil as a counterpart to good, a minute dose of evil would presumably do. But theists are not usually willing to say, in all contexts, that all the evil that occurs is a minute and necessary dose” (205).

“Evil is necessary as a means to good” (205). We might call this “the Means-Ends Solution.”

Mackie: “In its simple form this has little plausibility as a solution of the problem of evil, since it obviously implies a severe restriction of God’s power. It would be a causal law that you cannot have a certain end without a certain means, so that if God has to introduce evil as a means to good, he must be subject to at least some causal laws. This certainly conflicts with what a theist normally means by omnipotence [6]” (205; italics in original). “[T]he suggestion that evil is necessary as a means to good solves the problem of evil only by denying one of its constituent propositions, either that God is omnipotent [2] or that ‘omnipotent’ means what it says [6]” (205-6).

“The universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil” (206). We might call this “the Greater-Goods Solution,” for it says that second-order goods (such as sympathy, heroism, and benevolence) are greater than the first-order evils (such as pain, disease, danger, misery, and suffering) that make them possible. According to the theist, the actual world is “the best of all logically possible worlds” (207). Discuss the cases of Mother Teresa (née Agnes Bojaxhiu) (1910-1997) and John Walter Ripley (1939-2008).

Mackie: “[S]uch qualities as benevolence . . . have a merely derivative value. . . . they are not higher sorts of good, but merely means to . . . happiness, so that it would be absurd for God to keep misery in existence in order to make possible the virtues of benevolence, heroism, etc.” (207).

Mackie: “[I]t follows from this solution that God is not in our sense benevolent or sympathetic: he is not concerned to minimize [first-order evils], but only to promote [second-order goods]; and this might be a disturbing conclusion for some theists” (207).

Mackie: “[T]he fatal objection is this. Our analysis shows clearly the possibility of the existence of a second order evil [which contrasts with a second-order good]. This would include malevolence, cruelty, callousness, [and] cowardice. . . . And just as [a second-order good] is held to be the important kind of good, the kind that
God is concerned to promote, so [a second-order evil] will, by analogy, be the important kind of evil, the kind which God, if he were wholly good [3] and omnipotent [2], would eliminate” (207-8; italics in original). An attempt to explain second-order evil by postulating a third-order good will lead to “an infinite regress” (208), for then there would be a third-order evil; and so on *ad infinitum*.

- **“Evil is due to human freewill” (208).** We might call this “the Free-Will Solution.” “Perhaps the most important proposed solution of the problem of evil is that evil is not to be ascribed to God at all, but to the independent actions of human beings, supposed to have been endowed by God with freedom of the will” (208). “To explain why a wholly good God gave men freewill although it would lead to some important evils, it must be argued that it is better on the whole that men should act freely, and sometimes err, than that they should be innocent automata, acting rightly in a wholly determined way” (208).

  - **Mackie:** “I think that this solution is unsatisfactory primarily because of the incoherence of the notion of freedom of the will: but I cannot discuss this topic adequately here” (209).
  
  - **Mackie:** “[I]f 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? . . . Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent [2] and wholly good [3]” (209).
  
  - **Mackie:** “[I]f men’s wills are really free this must mean that even God cannot control them, that is, that God is no longer omnipotent [2]” (209-10).
  
  - Mackie doesn’t mention this, but the free-will solution explains only some evils—those that are “moral” rather than “natural.” Define these terms and discuss Alvin Plantinga’s attempt to extend the free-will solution to cover natural evils (via the fallen-angel hypothesis) and the criticism that this is *ad hoc*.

Mackie’s conclusion: “Of the proposed solutions of the problem of evil which we have examined, none has stood up to criticism. There may be other solutions which require examination, but this study strongly suggests that there is no valid solution of the problem which does not modify at least one of the constituent propositions in a way which would seriously affect the essential core of the theistic position” (212).