Think
by Simon Blackburn

Chapter 5a God
How many problems of evil are there according to Steven Law?

A. 1  🔴
B. 2  ✔️
C. 3  🔴
D. 4  🔴
Which of the following expresses a version of the problem of evil?

A. How do we know God is not an evil demon?

B. If God exists, why is there so much preventable suffering in the world?

C. How do we know the things we think are evil are really evil?

D. If evil is real then doesn’t that imply that good is not real?

X A. How do we know God is not an evil demon?

✓ B. If God exists, why is there so much preventable suffering in the world?

X C. How do we know the things we think are evil are really evil?

X D. If evil is real then doesn’t that imply that good is not real?
The next chapter examines arguments for and against the existence of God. Blackburn takes seriously the idea that religious people have beliefs that are meant to be evaluated in terms of their truth and falsity. For instance, he assumes that people who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ believe this in a literal sense, not just in some metaphorical or literary sense.
The ontological argument

- This chapter begins with an examination of what is known as the ontological argument for the existence of God, which was developed by St. Anselm around 1050 A.D.

- The ontological argument is an attempt to provide an absolute proof of the existence of God. Descartes employs a version of the proof in his *Meditations*.

- Today the argument is primarily of historical interest, though it is also a very useful tool for exposing the defects of rationalism, the view that genuine knowledge must come from reason alone.
The basic idea of the ontological proof

- The ontological proof is seductive, but deeply flawed in ways that Blackburn explains very clearly.
- In this class we won’t spend time with the details of the proof. But the basic idea is quite simple.
- Anselm essentially claims that it is part of God’s very nature to exist. Usually this claim is expressed as follows: God’s essence implies God’s existence.
The greatest conceivable being

- Anselm’s proof begins with the claim that God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being.
- He then claims that a being that exists is greater than a being that doesn’t exist.
- Hence it follows that if something really is the greatest conceivable being it necessarily exists.
Gaunilo’s refutation

- Probably the best refutation of the ontological argument was provided by a contemporary of Anselm, a monk named Gaunilo.
- Gaunilo simply pointed out that if Anselm were permitted to argue in this way then he could prove the existence of the most perfect anything.
- For example, the greatest conceivable beer would also have to exist, since existing is one of the properties it would have to have in order to be the greatest.
Hume’s critique

- One of the mistakes that Anselm and Descartes make in the ontological proof is in thinking that a thing’s existence can be a matter of logical necessity.

- As Hume, Kant, and many other philosophers have argued since then, whether a being exists is a contingent, empirical matter, and this can only be established by experience.

- This is the point of Blackburn’s Dreamboat analogy. You can not bring your perfect lover into existence simply by defining him or her as something that exists. The same holds true of God.
According to the ontological argument

A. God is the greatest conceivable being.
B. A being that exists is greater than one that doesn’t.
C. The greatest conceivable being necessarily exists.
D. All of the above.
The cosmological argument

- The cosmological argument is another argument for the existence of God. It was formulated by Aristotle (who did not himself believe in a personal god) and reformulated within the Christian tradition by St. Thomas Aquinas.

- The cosmological argument is a rationalist argument in that it is ultimately based on the meanings of certain terms, not observation of the world.

- Unlike the ontological argument, however, it is not primarily based on the meaning of the term ‘God’. Rather, it is based on the meaning of the term ‘cause’.
The cosmological argument: simple version.

- The basic idea behind the cosmological argument is that everything that exists, does so either contingently or necessarily.
  - Something exists **contingently** if it is caused by (or contingent upon) something else.
  - Something exists **necessarily** if it is impossible for it not to exist, and impossible for it to be caused or brought into being by something else.
- The simplest version of the cosmological argument then asserts that while physical events are clearly contingent, this chain of contingent causes can not extend back infinitely in time; at some point we must arrive at a first cause, which by definition would have to be a necessarily existing thing.
- It then asserts that this necessarily existing thing is God.
Problems with the simple version

- There are two main problems with this version of the cosmological argument.
  - First, how do we know that a chain of causation can not extend infinitely back into the past?
  - Second, supposing that the idea of a necessarily existing thing makes sense, what reason could we have for thinking that such a thing could be a being with the kinds of qualities we normally attribute to God?
A subtler version of the cosmological argument does not rely on the rejection of an infinite past.

It asserts that even if we allow that the chain of contingent causes is infinite in both directions (past and future) it still makes sense to ask what causes the entire chain of causes to come into existence.

The idea here is that contingent causes occur within space and time. But when we ask where space and time itself came from, the answer can only be in terms of something that exists necessarily.
Problems with the subtle version

- This version of the cosmological argument is still beset by the following difficulties:
  - Given that we accept the existence of something that exists necessarily, how do we know that the universe itself is not such a thing?
  - How do we know that there can not be an infinite chain of contingent causes of the universe itself?
  - Finally, does the idea of a necessarily existing thing even make sense?
The argument that the first cause of the universe must be a necessarily existing being is called:

A. The ontological argument

B. The cosmological argument
Which argument does not establish the existence of God as a perfect being?

A. The cosmological argument

B. The ontological argument
The ontological argument and the cosmological argument are similar in that they both rely on the idea of a necessarily existing being.

- In the ontological argument Anselm defines God as a being whose essence implies existence.
- In the cosmological argument Aquinas argues that the creator of everything could not itself have been created, hence would have to exist by its very nature.
Critique of necessary existence

- As we’ve already noted, the idea of a necessarily existing thing results from the rationalist dream of proving the existence of God.

- However, from an empiricist point of view, the idea of proving the existence of a thing with causal properties makes no sense. Evidence for the existence of such a thing must always come from experience.

- Even though Kant disagreed quite a bit with Hume, both Hume and Kant agreed that these kinds of proofs are fundamentally confused. (See p. 161.)
According to empiricist philosophers like Hume the idea of a necessarily existing being

A. is essential to understanding God.
B. is nonsensical.
C. is contingently true.
D. is itself a necessarily existing being.
The argument to design

- The design argument to the existence of God is distinct from both the ontological and the cosmological arguments in that it proceeds from experience.

- In other words, the design argument does not attempt to prove God’s existence with certainty. Rather, it hypothesizes God’s existence in an attempt to explain a certain kind of observation.

- Hence, the basic structure of the design argument is one that is consistent with the basic tenets of empiricism.
The design argument begins with observation that the universe is not chaotic, but rather highly ordered.

It proposes that it is reasonable to seek an explanation of this order.

The proposed explanation of the observed order in the universe is that the universe must have been designed.
The argument in favor of the design hypothesis is analogical in nature.

The basic claim is that the order we observe in the universe is just like the order we observe in a well-designed man-made object, such as a watch.

See p. 163.
The argument to design formalized

Here is one way of formalizing the design argument.

1. The universe is like a machine in that it displays a high degree of order.
2. The ordered nature of machines is due to the fact that they were designed by someone.
3. Therefore, the ordered nature of the universe is due to the fact that it was designed by someone.
The main problem with the design argument stems from the problematic nature of analogical argument itself.

The problem is that just about any two things in the universe are similar in some respect, but this similarity is rarely if ever sufficient to justify the conclusion that they must be similar in some other as yet unobserved respect as well.

Here, for example, is an argument with the same logical structure as the design argument:

1. A human is like a chimpanzee in that they share almost identical DNA.
2. As a result of their DNA, humans are capable of advanced mathematics.
3. Therefore, chimpanzees are capable of advanced mathematics.
The point is not that the chimp argument is absurd. The similarity of our DNA may actually be a good reason for wondering whether chimps could understand mathematics.

Rather, the point is that this argument is only successful in suggesting an interesting possibility, one that would have to be tested by further inquiry into the cognitive abilities of chimps.

Unfortunately, there is just no way to do this with the design argument. The claim that a watch was designed can be tested: we can ask to see the designer and the plans she followed. But the claim that universe was designed cannot be tested in the same way. Neither the designer nor the plans can be revealed to us without violating the assumption that the designer and his plans are somehow external to the universe itself.

Hence, as far as corroboration is concerned, the analogical argument can be nothing more than an interesting idea.
Specific problems with the design argument.

The design argument has some specific problems as well.

1. Although the order of universe is similar to that of a machine, it is also similar to that of an animal. Animals arise from a process of cellular replication, so it seems at least as plausible to suggest that the universe arises from this kind of process as well.

2. Complex designed objects like spaceships have many designers, not one. So even if we allow that the universe is designed, we have no reason to think that the universe had only one designer.

3. In our experience, intelligence is always the result of the activity of a brain, which is a physical thing. Hence the design argument would seem to entail the view that the designer of the universe itself has a brain, meaning that the designer of the universe is itself a physical being.
The problem of evil 1

- Much philosophy of religion focuses on the following question. Why does God permit evil? The attempt to answer this question is known as Theodicy.

- The question arises because monotheistic traditions conceive of God as having three properties: omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence.

- The question, then, is how an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful creator can permit widespread human suffering.

- This is a very large subject and Blackburn deals with it fairly narrowly, in terms of the design argument alone. The question he poses is whether a person who is truly aware of the incredible degree of human suffering that exists in the world would ever hypothesize that the universe was created by a being with the properties noted above.
Classical Theodicy is the attempt to show that God’s existence is logically possible given the amount of suffering in the universe. Many scenarios have been imagined that would make sense of this world being the best of all possible worlds.

The problem is that classical Theodicy is only of interest to someone who already believes in God. In the absence of any prior belief in God’s existence, the amount of suffering in the world is actually very compelling evidence that God lacks one of the properties noted above.

For example, God may simply be an extremely powerful being, but not an omnipotent one. Hence, while he loves us and knows that we suffer, he can only do so much to prevent it without eliminating the universe as a whole.