

Reviews

THE GOD OF THE PHILOSOPHERS by Anthony Kenny Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1979. pp. viii + 135.

The bulk of Kenny's book (pp. 15-117) comprises three parts dealing with omniscience, foreknowledge and omnipotence. There is also an Introduction (pp. 3-11) and a Conclusion (pp. 121-120).

Taking belief in divine omniscience to hold that for all p , if p , then God knows that p , Kenny discusses God's knowledge of the truths of logic and mathematics (Chapter II), God's knowledge of matters of experience (Chapter III), and God's knowledge of time and tensed propositions (Chapter IV). There then follows a treatment of divine omniscience and future matters like human actions, together with a discussion of substitutions for 'p' in 'for all p , if p then God knows that p ' involving counterfactual conditionals (Chapters V and VI).

Turning to omnipotence, Kenny first tries to find a satisfactory definition of it (Chapter VII). Next, he asks whether God can change or cancel or bring about the past (Chapter VIII). Finally, he considers the relationship between divine omniscience and divine goodness (Chapter IX).

In the light of his discussion, Kenny's main conclusions are that 'there is no such being as the God of traditional natural theology ... If God is to be omniscient ... he cannot be immutable. If God is to have infallible knowledge of future human actions, then determinism must be true. If God is to escape responsibility for human wickedness, then determinism must be false. Hence in the notion of a God who foresees all sins but is the author of none, there lurks a contradiction. Omnipotence may perhaps be capable in isolation, of receiving a coherent formulation; but omnipotence, while capable of accounting for some historic doctrines of predestination, is inadequate as a foundation of divine knowledge of undetermined human conduct. There cannot, if our argument has been sound, be a timeless, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent all-good being.' (p. 121)

Much of what Kenny says is undoubtedly correct. One passage, in particular, deserves quoting in full. Referring to the view that widespread atheism is evidence for the futility of natural theology, Kenny observes: 'It may indeed be that the existence of God is, as St Paul thought it was, something so obvious that only ill will or philosophical perversity could prevent one from seeing it. That something is denied by very many people is not proof that it is not obvious; and there is no lack of parallel examples of philosophically induced blindness. For centuries philosophers doubted the existence of the external world and lamented the lack of proof of the existence of other minds. To many of us, the arguments that led them to doubt these obvious truths now seem archaic sophistries. As for ill will, there is no lack of evidence of that. Anyone who has once believed in God and does so now no longer has no difficulty in pointing to events in his own life and vices in his own character which may have darkened his vision and perverted his judgement. We all have reason to fear the judgements of God and therefore to wish away the existence of a divine judge.' (pp. 128-129)

But some of Kenny's conclusions are somewhat premature. His discussion of omniscience and immutability does not, I think, do justice to elements latent in the defence of their compatibility offered by Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, 1979) and quoted by Kenny on p. 46. And Kenny's attack on the view that freedom is possible though God is omniscient and not the author of sin cannot be taken as final since it fails to cope with replies which may be made in reliance on such views as (1) that God is timeless, (2) that backward causation is a coherent notion, and (3) that God cannot be straightforwardly regarded as a moral agent. (3) is simply not discussed by Kenny who has nothing to say about topics like analogy. He does have an argument against

timelessness (pp. 38-39), but it is entirely directed at Aquinas and erroneously assumes that, for Aquinas, God's timeless knowledge involves duration or occupies a time-segment. Kenny also has arguments against the coherence of backward causation, but these are entirely directed against Michael Dummett's 'Bringing about the Past' (*Philosophical Review*, 1960) and are rather ineffectual. Kenny says that Dummett 'leaves it unclear how we are to distinguish between cause and effect' (p. 107), but he does not ask whether we can always clearly distinguish cause and effect even when unconcerned with backward causation. According to Kenny, Dummett leaves it enigmatic how we are to distinguish between earlier and later and past and future. But, although Dummett allows that event E2 may coherently be thought of as causing event E1, he does not deny that we can say that E2 followed E1, from which one infers that he can consistently hold

that E2 can be later than E1 and E1 earlier than, though caused by, E2. According to Kenny (p. 108), Dummett's account makes it look as if we could identify an event for what it is and ask whether it is a past or future event. He also says that Dummett's account leads to a picture of the past as a book containing blank pages so that 'we can turn back a page or two and fill in a blank'. But Dummett's account allows us to identify events as past and future in relation to each other. His point is just that one might postulate a causal connection between them other than of the kind people would commonly suppose. Dummett can also allow that the past is established and cannot be changed; but he will, of course, add that it is coherent to suppose that it is established for what it is by events that are future in relation to those which comprise it.

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MORTAL QUESTIONS by Thomas Nagel. *Cambridge University Press, 1979.*
pp. xiii + 213 £9.50 (hardback) and £2.95 (paperback).

Recent analytic moral philosophy is often accused of being trivial. The claim is that it hides behind a technical interest in language while shirking the task of actually saying what people ought to do. Nagel is very much part of modern analytical philosophy, but his interests are more than linguistic and he often reminds one of continental moralists like Sartre. He also admits to a traditional view of philosophy as a discipline which should and can alter our view of the world, an enterprise which tries to get to the truth of things. Contemporary philosophy, he critically observes in the preface of his new book, "is often accompanied by a tendency to define the legitimate questions in terms of the available methods of solution" (p. x). Nagel, by contrast, is inclined to argue that, for example, "there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language. We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them". (p. 171) According to Nagel, philosophy must convince, and its role is to "create understanding". (p. xi)

The philosopher, he adds, needs to maintain a "desire for answers". (p. xii)

Answers, of course, presuppose questions, and, in the present case, it is mortal questions that are at issue. What are mortal questions? Nagel defines them with reference to 'life'. "These essays", he writes, "are about life: about its end, its meaning, its value, and about the metaphysics of consciousness". (p. ix) Actually, there are fourteen essays in all, twelve of which have already appeared in some form elsewhere. Topics discussed include death (Why is it bad?), sexual perversion (Is there room for the notion?), war and massacre, equality and pansychism.

On the whole it seems to me that the present collection is well worth reading. God does not enter into Nagel's reckoning so perhaps he has not thoroughly explored the options for discussing the end of life. But within their deliberately non-religious framework Nagel's analyses are normally patient and his conclusions are often competently defended. Particularly worth reading is the paper on war and massacre. It provides a very clear account