

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.

BRIAN DAVIES O. P.

**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

of the dispute between ethical consequentialists and absolutists and argues well for a qualified form of absolutism. Its conclusion that absolutism may sometimes have to be abandoned seems to me premature in context, but it is at least consistent with Nagel's tendency towards a certain kind of scepticism.

That Nagel is basically sceptical emerges at several points. "I believe", he says, "we should trust problems over solutions, intuition over arguments and pluralistic discord over systematic harmony". (p. x) In a paper called *The Absurd*, Nagel's line is that life can seem absurd because we take it seriously but are unable to avoid the conclusion that all our ideas are somehow misguided. "We cannot", he explains, "live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd.

It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them". (p. 14)

The question, of course, is whether the doubts can be settled; for there are doubts and doubts and the general possibility of some doubts does not establish that everything can be doubted or that every belief needs a certain kind of support and justification. Here one would welcome a detailed discussion of truth and certainty, but Nagel, unfortunately, does not provide one.

One of the things he does provide, incidentally, is a delightful philosopher's definition of hunger. It is, he tells us, "an attitude towards edible portions of the external world" (p. 41) Moore would doubtless have been overjoyed with such a description, but quite what this external world is, Nagel does not explain. In a footnote to the paper on absurdity he merely tells us that he is sceptical about its existence. Food for thought here.

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**JULIAN OF NORWICH, SHOWINGS** translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh  
**SPCK London, 1979. pp. 369 £6.50**

The growing cult of Julian of Norwich is a recent phenomenon which has parallels with the medieval cult of earlier minor and local English saints. Instead of a translation of relics we hold a conference. Instead of pilgrimage, miracles and all the hullabaloo of a shrine we produce editions and translations and we form associations of like-minded persons. But perhaps the central significance of the saint has not changed: here is a friend of God, one who has influence in the court of heaven and can therefore be asked to mediate the healing mercy of God to man. With Julian it is not a case of approaching her physical remains (though presumably her bones still rest in Norwich) to ask for material help but of finding in her writings a power mediated towards the deeper ills of mankind, most of all that 'sharpest scourge', sin, 'which scourge belabours man or woman and breaks a man and purges him in his own sight so much that at times he thinks himself that he is not fit

for anything but as it were to sink into hell.' (p. 244)

The recent critical edition of the text of the two versions of the *Revelation of Divine Love* (Toronto, 1978) is a major contribution to the study of Julian's teaching, and this volume provides a translation of both texts by one of the scholars who produced the Middle English versions. The translation (and it is not at all certain that a modern English translation of a text already in English almost as familiar as that of Shakespeare is a necessity), this is an excellent book. The style is clear and rhythmical and the translation accurate. The notes which have been provided as an introduction, as with the notes of the Middle English texts, are curiously unsatisfying and on occasion are the product of unproved assumptions. For instance, the constant references to the works of William of St Thierry leaves the impression that he was a major influence on Julian, which is itself an assumption as yet un-