THINKING THINGS THROUGH: ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN FAITH, Andrew Murray SM, (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2012), pp. 228 + xvi, $34.95 (Electronic: $15.95).

For a number of years in the 1990s and early 2000s, Andrew Murray wrote a regular column for The Catholic Weekly. This book collects nearly 200 of these columns, which are each around 500 words in length, presenting them in twelve loose groupings, complemented by a topical index and an index of names. The topics range widely, from the areas of philosophy and faith promised in the title, through personal reflections, commentary on current political events (the largest single grouping), to social justice and Church affairs.

Murray is a priest who has taught philosophy at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for many years, and these essays reflect three of the great commitments of his life: priesthood, philosophy and teaching. They show the gift of an experienced preacher and teacher for setting a scene, developing a particular thought or question, and then concluding while he still has a firm grasp on his audience’s attention.

The essays range widely across Murray’s interests and expertise. At their best, they offer stimulating and illuminating insights, such as when he teases out the relation between vengeance and punishment (165), or the different types of justice for which one might strive (188, 196), or reflects on public opinion and polls to research this (147, 162), or argues that relativism and fundamentalism are parallel responses to an issue (76). Sometimes the essays bring a fresh and unexpected perspective to a current issue or event, such as by reflecting on dispositive causality to reject the arguments of the US National Rifle Association (88), or exploring the consequences of liberalism for marriage (91).

In difficult ethical questions, he shows great sensitivity, pointing out the potential for harm when contraception is presented as the moral equivalent of abortion (5), and the fallacy of arguments for allowing euthanasia on the basis of free choice when it entails the obliteration of any other choice (6-7). His pastoral experience shows in his practical and compassionate advice on matters such as being involved in arguments (68-70); being the parents of a homosexual child (12), preparing a eulogy (22), engaging in practices to mark Lent (23), and things in which one might rightly take pleasure (77).

Murray employs commonplace occurrences as an effective occasion for reflection and an insightful question. Thus, he moves from describing the stable of Jesus’ birth to comment on our materialism (21), uses recent census data to encourage ecumenical awareness and a welcome for non-Catholic spouses in Catholic communities (36), and recounts a conversation with a plumber in a way that leads to a reflection on the variations in different peoples’ perceptions of the same thing (216).

His teaching skills come to the fore in giving a simple, non-technical illustration of an aspect of complex issues, including language about God (32), the ultimate aim of knowledge (71), analogy (73), evil as a lack of good (82), and the phenomenological account of perception (214). At times, he invites the newspaper’s readers to consider dense philosophical concepts such as the relation between language and thought (62), the way that words refer to objects (63), postmodernism (75), and the question of being (74).

Some essays are deeply personal, but directed in a way that invites the reader to one’s own personal reflection (87, 89, 95, 101, 205). Other essays leave the reader with an invitation to think further themselves; for example, about the importance of truth-seeking rather than just truth-telling (79, 83), or the value we assign by our use of money (102-3), or what it means to live in a secular society (129), or what the task of evangelisation might be today (132).

As should by now be clear, there is a wealth of ideas and topics covered by these essays. However, the transition from newspaper column to a published collection brings with it a range of challenges for author and reader alike.

One of the strengths of the original columns is that often they are tightly embedded in particular events as their context. Reading them ten to fifteen years later, the events have often faded or no longer have the same significance. The columns understandably focus on particular issues rather than general principles, but they are undated, and many lose significance when uprooted from their original context. Thus, it is hard to see what is gained today by reprinting commentary on a particular offensive beer advertisement (133-34), particular political events, or the 1998 Constitutional Convention (146, 157, 169, 170).

Another challenge is that although in many cases the same issue is dealt with by a number of essays, each individual essay is self-contained in the 500 words of the original column. While these original columns clearly made a valuable contribution to public thought and reflection at the time, when gathered into a book they sometimes present several brief and unconnected comments on complex issues such as the treatment of asylum seekers, tax reform, the media, and globalisation. Here, they risk appearing somewhat superficial, simply asserting a series of observations or views, rather than really thinking things through.

Writing a regular column is a demanding commitment, and a very practical way for a respected academic such as Andrew Murray to engage with and contribute to public discourse. The greatest value of the book is as a permanent record of this contribution.

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