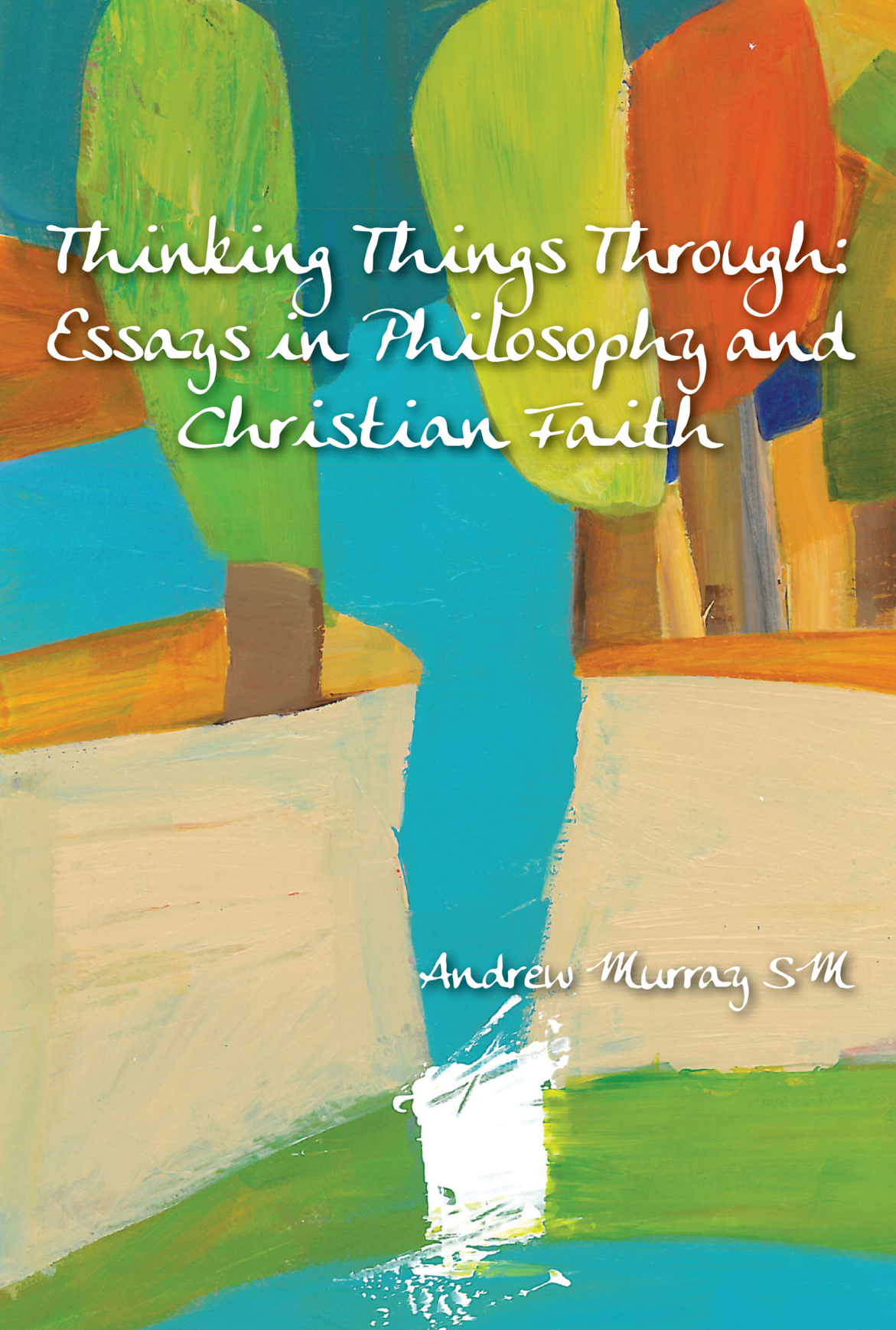


An abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The background is a vibrant blue. In the foreground, there are large, blocky shapes in green, yellow, and orange. A white, splattered shape is visible at the bottom center. The overall style is modern and expressive.

Thinking Things Through: Essays in Philosophy and Christian Faith

Andrew Murray S.M.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH: ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

Andrew Murray SM

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Andrew Murray SM



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In memory of
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Peter and Helen

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Preface

These essays first appeared in the Australian Catholic newspaper, *The Catholic Weekly*, in a regular column, which I wrote at first fortnightly and later weekly during the 1990's and early 2000's. They are written by a philosopher as a philosopher but also by a committed Christian, writing in a Christian context. They therefore endeavour to bring light to the issues they address from twin sources – faith and reason.

The life of a philosopher is foremost the life of thinking but it is also the life of imagination that dreams of and investigates possibilities that might not otherwise have been raised. The life of a Christian is the life of faith, hope and charity, and so it both looks to things beyond this world and regards this world with compassion. The two can work together. Faith softens reason, and reason sharpens faith. Imagination finds new ways to articulate in concrete circumstances what has belonged to long traditions of thought.

These essays cover a wide range of topics either by way of simple reflection on life or in response to issues that arose around the time of writing. The period of writing was a varied one. Life looked so stable in the mid-nineties that we contemplated Australia becoming a republic and sought Aboriginal reconciliation. It remained uncomplicated at the time of the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 but became troubled by political events and by the terrorist attacks of 2001. The essays respond to this time. Four essays not published in the *Weekly* have been added to take note of more recent changes that have taken place in the Church and in our world. Some essays have been updated.

I am grateful to the editor of *The Catholic Weekly* at the time, Donna Wedesweiler, firstly for the way in which she inducted me into writing for the *Weekly*. Tightly written essays do not fare well if cut in the ways that newspaper editors often do when faced with issues of space. Donna was very generous when dealing with such matters. She also offered helpful suggestions and corrections when they were needed. Secondly, I would like to thank her for her encouragement when I first thought of republishing the essays in this form.

I would like to thank two other people for consistent help and encouragement in writing. Gerard Kelly, a friend and colleague, was always ready to talk about issues and gave me the benefits of a prudent and subtle mind. Mary Roddy, a friend of many years, is always interested in what is happening in the world and in the Church and contributed to the project of writing with both enthusiasm for what is and care for how others might respond. Both were always available to talk over a difficult sentence or paragraph.

Special thanks are due to Neil Brown, who, in his time as President of Catholic Institute of Sydney, made the opportunity to write available after first persuading me that writing is a good thing.

Finally, I would like to thank Hilary Regan and the staff of AFT Press for their excellent work in bringing the essays to publication in this form and for the enthusiasm and ease with which they did it.

The essays have been grouped into sections of broad subject areas, which show up in the table of contents. Within those sections they appear in order of publication. An index is provided to give access to discussion of particular topics.

Andrew Murray SM
Catholic Institute of Sydney
15 August 2012

ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY



What Constitutes a Happy Life?

Moral debate rages around us all the time. It tends to focus on issues that are either difficult or controversial or both, such as euthanasia or abortion. Within the Church things such as the publication of a new encyclical or the disclosure of wrong-doing by someone in authority generate similar discussions.

Necessary though they are, these debates tend to obscure the most fundamental question of morals. It is a question that is unremarkable at first glance. Yet it is also one that precedes all these others and one that ought be asked every day.

The question is this. What constitutes a happy life? What makes up a happy life? How do I live a life that is happy? It is a general question in so far as it can be asked of human nature in general. But it is also a particular question and must be asked within the context and circumstances of a particular life. It is about life, and hence for the question to be asked there must be a life, and it must be lived. In this sense the question does not lose its vitality until life is over.

It is not an easy question to answer for two reasons. First, it has to be answered without first determining what happiness and the good are. Rather, what they are will emerge once our question begins to become clear. Second, the answer will be complex because it covers life and every aspect of the activities that go to make up life.

There are, of course, other very basic questions, for instance, how are we to live together? The believer must ask, how do I relate to God? The Christian must ask, how do I follow Christ? The dispensation of grace raises its own issues. However, I believe that the question, what constitutes a happy life?, remains fundamental. It is philosophical rather than religious, and the believer may well have a richer answer. But, if moral questions are separated from this fundamental question, they will become vacuous and nonsensical.

The question is particularly relevant today. I am sure that it troubles the young and even that it is probably only vaguely formulated by them. In former ages it was not a big issue. How one lived was determined to a large extent by the village in which one lived and by who one's parents were. Today the young are faced not only with a bewildering array of possibilities for what they might do with their lives but also with a bewildering array of ways to think about it.

We can assist the young by helping them to focus on this question. When the latest advertisement moves their desires towards a new product, or when the suggestions of a music video catch their attention, or when they are negotiating the complexities of relationships in their lives, or when they just want to know what to do, we can bring them back to the question of how all these things fit into a whole life and a happy life. We can deal in similar fashion with the issues of our own lives.

What is Moral Reasoning?

At the beginning of his *Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that the investigation 'will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject-matter allows'. He goes on to indicate that ethics is not an exact science and advises that 'it is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of the subject permits'.

All of this reads a bit strangely to us today. We are used to regarding the physical sciences as the prime instance of good reasoning. Even what we call the social sciences attempt to take on their methodologies. By means of idealisation, measurement and mathematics, these sciences provide us with very precise answers to the questions we put. These answers, moreover, are said to transcend the contexts of particular individuals, cultures and languages. If Aristotle was right, ethics does not belong here.

Australian, Sydney based, philosophers, Damian Grace and Stephen Cohen, provide a contemporary account of moral reasoning in the first chapter of their book, *Business Ethics*. They distinguish a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach. In the first, we take general principles and apply them to specific situations. In the second, we start with the judgments based on intuition and feeling that people actually make in particular situations and see these as statements of first principle. Grace and Cohen combine these two in a third approach, in which 'neither particular judgments nor general principles are pre-eminent'. Rather, the two are kept in 'reflective equilibrium'. 'Moral reasoning is a matter of bringing into harmony, or consistency, various particular judgments with each other and with the principles which we hold.'

In more traditional language, we can say that moral reasoning combines both the ability to draw out the implications of moral principles, such as the commandments, and the sensibility or moral feeling to perceive good and evil in particular situations and contexts. Each presents its own problems. The difficulty of finding general moral principles is the basis of the many ethical systems around us. Sound moral feeling, on the other hand, is dependent on well-developed character. Further, we fail when our thinking becomes either too cerebral or purely a matter of sentiment.

Such a way of thinking and reasoning is quite different from the ways in which we think about other things. We cannot measure or calculate moral outcomes. Nor can we ever eliminate the need for judgement of particular cases. Since it is a special way of reasoning, we need to learn how to do it. One of the difficulties of the major ethical debates of our time is that often the proponents, while sophisticated in their own disciplines, lack similar training in moral reasoning.

Reference: Damian Grace and Stephen Cohen, *Business Ethics: Australian Problems and Cases* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1995).

Excellence Rather Than Prohibition

While talking about moral activity in his *Ethics* (II, 6, 1107a9), Aristotle makes the following statement.

Not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them.

For Aristotle, these kinds of things are simply bad and there is not much else to be said about them. Indeed, outside the paragraph in which this sentence appears, Aristotle says very little about them at all. Instead, he talks about happiness, about human excellence and about friendship. He clearly finds these things far more interesting and important.

For Aristotle, the human excellences that lead to happiness are a matter of balance. They involve finding the balance, or what he calls the mean, between the extremes of possibility in feeling, thought and action. When that balance is achieved a human being functions at its best and, says Aristotle, is most assuredly happy.

A good example is what he calls friendliness, which has to do with the kind of pleasantness that smooths the social interactions of people. To be truly friendly one has to find the balance between two pairs of opposites: between contentiousness, in which one opposes everybody, and obsequiousness, in which one praises all; and between churlishness, in which one is disagreeable simply out of meanness, and flattery, in which one is agreeable but only in hope of gain. Friendly people have the knack of finding the balance between agreement and disagreement and between praise and opposition in the situations and circumstances in which they find themselves.

The point of balance differs according to differences in individuals, in groups of people, in time and in circumstance. This is what Aristotle finds interesting in ethics—the ability to suit thought, feeling and action to the circumstances of the moment and therefore to live successfully individually and in relation to other people.

This gives us a clue to why Aristotle has so little interest in those other moral issues. As he says, ‘goodness or badness with regard to such things [does not] depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to do wrong.’

Catholic moral discussion has probably spent too much time focusing on the simply bad. This may give us the advantage of being mostly right, but it also makes us terribly boring and perhaps authoritarian and even lazy. Our tradition, on the other hand, contains wonderful things about love, about friendship, about reconciliation, about destiny, about the meaning of life, about the finest things in life. Were we to offer these to the world, we might find there a far more favourable reaction to our message.

References: Aristotle, *Ethics* II, 6; II, 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Ethics in Journalism

A number of years ago, by a strange irony of fate, at the very time that Earl Spencer was castigating the press for the destructive roles it played in the life and death of his sister, Princess Diana, the Ethics Review Committee of the Australian Journalists' Association Section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance was preparing to publish its report, which proposes a new code of ethics for Australian journalists.

The proposed code itself takes up just over two pages. It consists of twenty standards that journalists will be expected to apply to their activities. The standards are preceded by statements that set out the ethical aspirations and values of journalists and followed by a guidance clause that assists in interpretation of difficult cases.

The report, however, is a full-length book of 186 pages. It includes an introduction that explains how the committee went about its work and the issues that were raised for it and provides an extensive discussion of what a code is and of how one might work. A detailed commentary discusses the meaning and relevance of each of the standards. There is a significant section on enforcement of the code and a number of useful appendices that fill out the context of the study.

It is interesting to compare standards in the code with Earl Spencer's accusations against the press. He said, 'It would appear that every proprietor of every publication that has paid for intrusive and exploitative photographs of her, encouraging greedy and ruthless individuals to risk everything in pursuit of Diana's image, has blood on their hands today'. Standard 4, on use of 'fair and honest means to obtain material'; and 8, on disclosure of payments cover this.

The Earl said, 'I always believed the press would kill her in the end'. Standard 16 states, 'Never knowingly endanger the life or safety of a person . . .'

The Earl called his sister, 'the most hunted person of the modern age'. Standard 13 says, 'Accept the right to privacy of every person . . .', and the commentary discusses the issue of privacy for public figures. Standard 14 says, 'At times of grief or trauma, always act with sensitivity and discretion. Never harass'.

Finally, the Earl asked why the media would treat his sister in this way and concluded, 'My own and only explanation is that genuine goodness is threatening to those at the opposite end of the moral spectrum'. The whole code and the commentary is an answer to this accusation, because its purpose is to help engender an ethical culture among Australian journalists. Its intent is serious.

Ethical issues are often difficult, but within a short time it will be a fair challenge to any Australian journalist to ask, 'Do you have a copy of *Ethics in Journalism* (Melbourne University Press, 1997) and have you read it?' The report is meant to be educational and failure to consider it on the part of journalists or of the interested public will, indeed, be a moral failing.

References: Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Ethics Review Committee. *Ethics in Journalism*. Melbourne University Press, 1997.

Pro-life Means Pro Life

In an address during his Pontificate the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II urged Catholic families ‘to show the world that it is possible to be faithful, responsible and generous in loving’.

It is important to keep this kind of instruction in mind when we think about what it is to be pro-life. It is easy to think of pro-life issues as relating only to the time between conception and birth with, perhaps, an extension to the final moment of death. Life, however, is most manifest in the time between birth and death, and it is something to be lived. It is what we can show about the possibilities of this time that will be the strongest argument for life at its beginning and end.

The world has for some time been shocked by the ugliness of the extreme wing of the anti-abortion movement in the United States. They have shown a readiness to engage in violence against persons to support their cause. While we can appreciate the distress that has lead them to act the way they do, their actions destroy the very case they are trying to make. As well, the bitterness of their public statements repels rather than attracts people, who might want to deal seriously with the issue.

Within the public discourse of the Catholic Church there has appeared to be a tendency to equate the gravity of contraception with the gravity of abortion. Anyone who thinks about it for a moment must realise that these are vastly different kinds of things. It would be tragically ironic if their identification were unwittingly to support the growing practice in which abortion is used simply as a form of contraception. That such practice has become common in Australia is immensely regrettable.

If we are to support life seriously, we have to address all the issues that impinge on life. At the social level these include those issues to do with the effects of population stress and with the causes and conditions of hunger and poverty in the world. We have to tackle injustice even in those places where this is uncomfortable for the Church, such as in South America where the Church appears to have been in collusion with unjust regimes for some time.

Above all we need to find a way of showing the world that life can be lived lovingly and well. To do this in the world in which we in the West find ourselves is not easy, but it is the significant challenge that the Holy Father has issued to us. The difficulty is seen in the chaos experienced by many families during the decades since the Second World War; the ideal is one of harmony, human achievement and meaningful life. The serious moral question is: how does one live well in the time and under the circumstances in which it is given to one to live?

Euthanasia: A Question?

One of the strangest things about the euthanasia debate is that it is debated at all. Although suicide has always been with us, it is recognised as an act of desperation in which a person's mind is so disturbed that death appears as the only alternative. The notion, on the other hand, of persons fully in control of their faculties calmly and rationally deciding to end life neatly and clinically seems all-wrong. One of the fundamental inclinations of ordered life is to preserve life, that is, to live.

Why is it then that in our time society should be debating a question that ordinarily would not even be asked? One way of answering this question is to recognise that before euthanasia could become a problem many other things had to go wrong. As a moral issue, it is parasitic on a host of other issues that are being dealt with badly in our time. It is worth raising some of them.

How does one live old age? There have been times when few people survived long beyond the years of child bearing and raising and certainly beyond the time of economic necessity. Today the average life span of both men and women has crept into the seventies and many live into their eighties. Medicine and good food keep them alive and economic planning makes them independent. It should be a time of grace and choice, a time of richness of life, a time of healing, but is it?

How does one die? Much is being published about inadequacies in the practice of palliative care, and specialists are telling us that few need die in dreadful pain. But deeper issues are at stake. We live in a culture in which the processes of death are shunned. People seem to want either to hold death at bay or to hasten it. We need to learn how to die and how to face death.

What is wrong with physical pain? Our culture recoils from physical pain at the same time as we subject ourselves to all sorts of other distress—substance abuse, stress, destructive relationships, emotional violence. Why is it that we should find physical pain so objectionable? Are there not circumstances in which pain might be a tolerable consequence of some greater gain?

What is medicine for? Medicine has advanced enormously during this century. Its practice is often based on the premises that health is the primary good of life and that life ought to be extended as long as possible. Are these premises true? Or is something more subtle needed?

How does one live a happy life? A happy life demands thoughtfulness and discipline, yet how rarely do we ask how one goes about it. Do all the things that we seek to have, to be and to do make our lives better?

Whom is a life for? Is it for just the one living it, or do others have claims too?

The euthanasia debate is important. While the Church is firm in its opposition, it is not enough to keep repeating the argument 'life is sacred'. We need to find new arguments that will persuade the people of our time. We also need to examine and address the conditions that allow the question to arise. Until we manage to do that, it will not go away.

Protecting Choice: Against the Legalisation of Euthanasia

Persons suffering a terminal disease do not come to what might be called the final moment instantaneously. Rather they go through stages of diagnosis and treatment, which are accompanied by moments of challenging readjustment to the situation and by complex renegotiation of familial and other relationships. This process is not normally completed even at the beginning of the final medical phase, when treatment becomes palliative rather than curative.

In all of this there are many choices to be made. Early on, decisions may be made largely in terms of medical benefits and side effects, but, as the situation worsens, other factors such as the person's age and commitments, relationships, wishes for their final days, hopes, fears and spiritual goals become far more significant. These are matters calling for personal choice.

Choices have to be made about who to tell about what is believed to be a likely outcome of a disease and when to tell them. Neither an early fatalism nor adamant denial to the last minute on the part of either the sick person or members of a family are helpful, yet the middle ground is found only by careful negotiation of feelings and understandings as the overall situation develops. Doing this well demands careful and enlightened judgement, so that the sick need to feel that they have freedom to choose carefully.

In a liberal society, a fundamental role of law is the protection of people's freedom. This is often expressed in terms of rights—the right to free speech, the right of assembly, the right to representation in government. These freedoms can also be expressed in terms of choices—choices about career, children's education, where to live and so on.

In the simplest case this protection is envisaged as protection from the activities of the state itself. However, it is generally extended to protection from other individuals as in the case of security of person and property, and to protection from society as such, as when we insist on allowing minorities to be different. In an egalitarian society the pressure to conform to common opinion can be enormous, so that the state has a role in protecting even those who want to be different as long as that difference is not disruptive of other people's rights or of harmonious living.

The problem with legalising euthanasia is that euthanasia is such an apparently easy solution to a very difficult situation that it obliterates not only all other choices but the very structure of choice itself. In the face of such an easy option, a patient will not be able to find his or her way into those many issues that call for resolution at the end of a life. Yet this will have denied the person the possibility of a much richer process of choice and adjustment. Families, too, will have had to adjust not to a gradual process of coming to terms with death and separation but to the stark reality of a *fait accompli*. Although legalised euthanasia may seem at first sight to increase personal freedom, when examined more carefully it is seen, in fact, to diminish freedom.

The state does have a significant role in protecting people's freedom and choice in the event of terminal illness and death. Part of that role is to legislate against euthanasia so that the complex structure of choice at this most difficult time remains intact.