

Susan Stebbing: Analysis, Common Sense, and Public Philosophy

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I always wished that she would write a book, or at least a paper, free from the pressure of other duties or any promise to have it done by a certain time. But no—there was always something, if not a committee meeting then a taxi for Ireland, and with a suitcase in her hand and a hat trifle insecure upon her head she would be gone.

— John Wisdom (1948: 2)

Susan Stebbing was busy. After publishing her MA thesis in 1914,¹ she would go on to author six additional books—spanning logic, ethics, politics, critical thinking, and the philosophy of physics—many of which were well reviewed and the recipient of multiple reprints.² Among them was her highly praised *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930), a 500-page critical introduction to logic, and the first textbook of its time to assimilate the logical and metaphysical developments of Frege and Whitehead and Russell.³

Then there were the articles and reviews, approximately 121 in total, appearing in some of the field's top journals. Stebbing's reviews ran the gamut: from Gothic art and architecture to the philosophy of religion, ethics, and idealism, to metaphysical treatises inspired by the new physics, to the latest anti-metaphysical screeds of the Vienna Circle. Stebbing's reviews outnumbered her research articles, yet they hardly overshadow them. Her journal articles spurred much discussion during their time and include what are now rightful classics of analytic philosophy, including the "The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics" (1932–33), among others.

And then, of course, there was everything in between—the meetings, appoint-

¹ *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* (1914).

² These books are *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930); *Logic in Practice* (1934); *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937); *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939); *Ideals and Illusions* (1941); and *A Modern Elementary Logic* (1943).

³ At the time, "[n]o other book of its kind had then been published," writes Wisdom (1948: 2).

ments, and taxis to somewhere, as her colleague John Wisdom alludes to above. A visiting professorship in 1931 to lecture on mathematical logic and metaphysics at Columbia University, New York; President of the Aristotelian Society in 1933, a position she would hold for one year before assuming the same role at the Mind Association until 1935. There was also a new (and soon-to-be highly influential) journal to inaugurate, *Analysis*, which Stebbing co-founded with several others in 1933. In that same year, Stebbing would make literal headlines by becoming the first woman to hold a chair in philosophy in Britain.

While Stebbing may have not produced a single thing that *wasn't* free from the pressures of her career, her output was nothing short of prolific. The range and magnitude of her accomplishments are evidence that, despite the conditions that she was working against as both a disabled person⁴ and woman in early twentieth-century Britain—and in British academic philosophy no less—Stebbing achieved great prominence during her lifetime as a philosopher.

1 Susan Stebbing: Life, Work, and Reception

1.1 A Biographical Sketch

Susan “Lizzie” Stebbing was born in 1885 in Finchley, North London, the youngest of six children. She suffered early on from Ménière’s Disease, a chronic disorder that causes bouts of vertigo and tinnitus and would struggle with its often-debilitating symptoms for the entirety of her life.⁵ As a result, the young Stebbing’s health was deemed precarious, and it was determined that she was unfit for full-time schooling; Stebbing’s early education would therefore be the product of homeschooling. Eventually, however, she would go on to study at the recently opened Girton College, Cambridge,⁶ the first women’s college in the UK. Initially interested in reading for a science degree,⁷ Stebbing’s poor and unpredictable

⁴ Stebbing suffered from Ménière’s Disease. See §§1.1 below.

⁵ Chapman (2013: 42) notes that Stebbing often refers to her ill health in both her personal correspondence and professional papers.

⁶ Girton was founded in 1869 and opened in 1873, only twelve years before Stebbing was born.

⁷ There are slightly conflicting reports here, as Chapman (2013: 11) has pointed out. In Stebbing’s *Mind* obituary, for example, it’s reported that she was initially interested in reading classics. As indicated by Chapman, however, the *Mind* obituary contains a slew of biographical errors. Another obituary in the *Girton Review* claims that Stebbing was originally interested in reading for a science degree, a claim that is apparently based on the testimony of one of her friends.

health permitted her from doing so.⁸ She ended up studying history instead, taking Part I and II of the History Tripos in 1906 and 1907, respectively.

But it was in 1907 that something happened. Studying in the library for Part II of the History Tripos, Stebbing stumbled upon F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* and was apparently so gripped that she decided that she would also go for the Moral Sciences Tripos. And so, she did. Receiving training from the logician W.E. Johnson,⁹ Stebbing took (and passed) Part I of the Moral Science Tripos in 1908, a year after completing the History Tripos.

Though women were able to take the Tripos and be awarded the requisite classifications, they would not go on to receive degrees; Cambridge and Oxford, among several other British institutions, refused degrees to women at this time. Despite, then, being educated in two subjects, Stebbing would not receive degrees in either one. Indeed, it would not be possible for a woman to earn a degree from Cambridge in Stebbing's lifetime; the first degree wouldn't be awarded to a Cambridge-educated woman until 1948—five years after Stebbing's death.¹⁰

Rather than remain at Cambridge to complete Part II of the Moral Tripos, Stebbing decided to leave, heading south to the University of London, to pursue an MA in Moral Science. There, she could earn a degree,¹¹ doing so in 1912 with a thesis on American pragmatism and French voluntarism. Some of Stebbing's first published articles emerge around this time, including a paper criticizing Henri Bergson's theory of knowledge in 1913 and a 1917 defense of Aristotelian logic, responding to attacks on its philosophical relevance.¹² Stebbing's masterful study of a logic far more powerful than Aristotle's syllogistic system would appear thirteen years later. It was also this year, 1917, that Stebbing encountered a philosopher—"not [Bertrand] Russell"—at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society "who began to ask me questions with a vehement insistence that considerably alarmed me" (1942: 530). The questions were directed at Stebbing's paper, "Relation and Coherence," which she had just finished reading to the Society. The

⁸ Janssen-Lauret (2022: 9) speculates that there may have been gendered pressures that pulled Stebbing away from both classics and the sciences given that these were very "male-coded" fields in nineteenth-century academia.

⁹ Another logician, Mistress of Girton College, E.E. Constance Jones, a protégé of Henry Sidgwick and the first woman to speak at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, was also active during this time. Although Stebbing didn't officially study with her, she did engage with her work on logic.

¹⁰ Oxford began granting degrees to women slightly earlier, in 1920.

¹¹ The University of London granted degrees to women beginning in 1878.

¹² Published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* and *Science Progress*, respectively.

questions continued and by the end, this philosopher had, according to Stebbing, “unraveled [her] muddles and enabled [her] to see more clearly” (1942: 530).

Stebbing would soon discover that this philosopher was none other than G.E. Moore. She would joust with him again at the Society’s following meeting, in 1918, where she would criticize some of his ideas in her paper “The Philosophical Importance of the Verb ‘To Be.’” Both occasions prompted an intense correspondence which eventually developed into a lifelong friendship which also extended to Moore’s wife, Dorothy Moore.

Between her MA graduation in 1912 and 1920, Stebbing struggled to find a permanent academic position. She held several temporary, part-time teaching posts in both London and Cambridge which also included a brief stint as a schoolteacher in 1915.¹³ She also retained ties with Girton College where, while finishing her degree at the University of London, she had become a Visiting Lecturer in 1911, before becoming Director of Moral Science Studies in 1918. Yet, even with these appointments, Stebbing’s future remained uncertain. Despite this, she managed to publish seven articles, many of them appearing in *Mind* and the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, where she criticized pragmatic conceptions of truth. There was also the publication of her first book, *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* (1914), which was drawn from her MA thesis and published by Cambridge University Press.

Having experienced the atrocities of the Great War, Stebbing found herself compelled to act. Lecturing on behalf of the League of Nations Union, Stebbing traveled the country after the First World War to promote pacifism. When those efforts were eventually met in vain twenty-one years later, she helped take in Jewish refugees from Nazi occupied countries.¹⁴ By 1920, however, Stebbing secured an appointment as an Assistant Lecturer in Philosophy at Bedford College (now Royal Holloway, University of London), a women’s college in London. Things moved quickly from there: she was promoted to Lecturer the following year, securing a five-year appointment, and by 1923-24 was offered a full-time lectureship—just shy of turning 40. She would remain at Bedford College for the rest of her life.

By the 1920s, Stebbing’s philosophical interests had shifted away from the themes of her MA thesis and engaged more closely with the philosophy of

¹³ This was at the Kingsley Lodge School for Girls, a school in which Stebbing and two close friends, Vivian Shepherd and Hilda Gavin, had become joint owners. Though Stebbing would only briefly teach there, she would remain closely involved with the school. During World War Two, Stebbing would use Kingsley to house refugee children (Chapman 2013: 37, 159).

¹⁴ Chapman (2013: 38, 126).

science—particularly with the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead was initially a figure of philosophical admiration for Stebbing, though this admiration waned as his work—as Stebbing saw it—grew increasingly obscure. Stebbing also found herself engaged in debates about realism and materialism with respect to modern physics. Here, Stebbing found little room for admiration. Her attitude was unabashedly critical, taking highly acclaimed physicists like Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jean to task for the muddled, idealistic conclusions they had too hastily drawn from the new physics. “Both these writers,” Stebbing remarks, “approach their task through an emotional fog; they present their views with an amount of personification and metaphor that reduces them to the level of revivalist preachers” (1937: 6). The tone was hardly unusual for Stebbing who rarely veered away from telling it like it is.¹⁵

The next decade, roughly between 1930 and Stebbing’s death in 1943, would bring about a flurry of productivity. After the publication of *A Modern Introduction to Logic* in 1930—a book which “confirmed Stebbing’s place as a voice in contemporary British philosophy” (Chapman 2013: 58)—Stebbing would devote much philosophical attention to what came to be known as “Cambridge analysis,” a label Stebbing very much disliked but which stuck because of the influence exerted by Cambridge-educated Russell and Moore (as well as the Cambridge-affiliated Wittgenstein) on several younger generations of philosophers. However, it was by no means clear whether each of these figures meant the same thing by “analysis” or what exactly it meant to say that philosophy is concerned with analysis. Indeed, it was this younger group of philosophers—Stebbing especially, as well as John Wisdom and others—who believed it was their task to sort this all out.

Many of Stebbing’s publications during this period are focused on just that.¹⁶ In fact, Stebbing was arguably the first to clearly distinguish two kinds of analysis: that between *metaphysical* analysis, or what Stebbing called “directional” analysis, and *logical* analysis, or what Wisdom called “same-level” analysis. Several of Stebbing’s major philosophical contributions came in the form of distinguishing and decoupling metaphysical analysis from logical analysis.¹⁷ Stebbing not only

¹⁵ Although she could be equally as critical of herself. Indeed, many of Stebbing’s papers begin by condemning her previous ideas as hopeless and muddled. See Chapman (2013: 87) who also picks up on this idiosyncrasy.

¹⁶ Cf. “The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics” (1932–33); “Logical Positivism and Analysis” (1933); and “Some Puzzles about Analysis” (1938–39).

¹⁷ The latter came to be loosely associated with the Vienna school and accordingly came to be known as the “Vienna school of analysis,” whereas the former became closely associated with the Cambridge school and hence came to be known as the “Cambridge school of analysis.”

sought to register a distinction between these two different forms of analysis but to show that this was indeed a distinction *with* a difference. Whereas logical analysis aims to replace ordinary, natural language expressions with their logically perspicuous counterparts, metaphysical analysis aims to uncover, or identify, the ultimate facts that the constituents of propositions refer to.¹⁸ It's this difference in aim and purpose that Stebbing saw the Logical Positivists (of both the Vienna and Berlin schools) as failing to appreciate and understand. Hence, she saw their treatment of analysis as incomplete.

Increasingly, however, Stebbing began to place little stock in metaphysical analysis, coming to view it as “a hangover from the days when ‘the problem of the external world’ was envisaged as primarily a problem of justifying common sense beliefs” (1942: 527). Instead, she began turning her attention to logical analysis and the analysis of language. Two books would emerge out of this shift in direction: *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) and *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), the latter becoming a Penguin best seller in Britain. Their aims were largely to uncover the various ways that language can obfuscate and mislead in the context of popular science and the media, respectively. Written with the intention of reaching a wider audience, “popular philosophy” was a genre Stebbing found herself drawn to. This was, perhaps, not without good reason. The world had plunged itself into war—its second in twenty-one years—with horrors even more unimaginable than the first. Stebbing's two books here, and the two works she would subsequently write—*Ideals and Illusions* (1941) and her posthumously published Hobhouse Memorial lecture, *Men and Moral Principles* (1944)—would serve as handbooks that endeavored to defend democratic ideals. They would be steadfastly focused on instructing people how to think more clearly by paying attention to how language is used by politicians and journalists. Deconstructing examples culled from various news clippings, Stebbing would show how language was used to deceive and mislead, leading us to error and “potted thinking”¹⁹—or worse, a third world war. Indeed, it was around this time, 1938, that Stebbing and a group of other writers established *The Modern Quarterly*, a leftist journal “committed to fighting Fascism.”²⁰ Stebbing, despite

¹⁸ The difference can be captured in a slightly different way. We might say that the relation involved in logical analysis is a symmetrical relation (one of synonymy) whereas the relation involved in metaphysical analysis is an asymmetrical one. See also Stebbing (1932: 311, fn. 4) who glosses the difference in a similar way.

¹⁹ For Stebbing, “potted thinking” refers to the oversimplification of an idea or expression, such as a slogan or catchword. Not all potted thinking is vicious, however.

²⁰ Chapman (2013: 122).

proclaiming to be “not politically minded” (254) in *Thinking to Some Purpose*, would have fooled most.

After 1939, Stebbing was busier than ever. While she would no longer publish any full-length journal articles, she would be invited to numerous talks and symposiums, write *A Modern Elementary Logic* (1942), and contribute to the Schilpp volume *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*. Stebbing’s momentum during this time, however, would be short-lived. In 1941, she would be diagnosed with cancer. She would recover, with treatment and an operation, before falling ill again, undergoing yet another operation in July of 1943. It was to no avail: Stebbing would pass away two months later on September 11th of that year. Her future projects—a detailed comparison of Moore and Russell’s philosophical development, a book on convention in science, and more—were simply not to be. And, yet, Stebbing already left us with plenty.

1.2 Work and Reception

The case of Susan Stebbing is not necessarily one of *historical* marginalization. Though, of course, Stebbing was working against the patriarchal structures of the Victorian/Edwardian era, as well as British academia and the male-dominated discipline of philosophy,²¹ neither she nor her work was neglected by her peers and colleagues. She held presidencies at two of the most prestigious philosophical societies, published in her field’s top journals and helped found another, published books with some of the best popular presses, held a permanent lectureship in philosophy at a university in a major city center, and interfaced and debated with some of philosophy’s and science’s best minds at the time—the same minds who discussed and responded to her work.

Stebbing’s case is better characterized as a case of *historiographical* marginalization.²² Stebbing simply stopped being discussed. Today, she is not a household name; analytic philosophers don’t know her and don’t read her; she is not mentioned in the same breath as Russell, Moore, or Wittgenstein. Yet, as Michael Beaney has pointed out, “[Stebbing] did more than anyone else to promote the

²¹ A vivid, unfortunate reminder of the times: With G.E. Moore retiring, Stebbing was thought to be a worthy replacement, except her gender precluded her from being seriously considered. In a letter to two close colleagues, Stebbing reports with frustration, “On Thursday, [Gilbert] Ryle . . . annoyed me by saying (re the appointment) ‘Of course everyone thinks you are the right person to succeed Moore, except that you are a woman.’ (I don’t swear those were his words—but as nearly as I remember!)” (Chapman 2013: 126).

²² A nice discussion of these differences can be found in Peijnenburg and Verhaegh’s article “Analytic Women”: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-lost-women-of-early-analytic-philosophy>

development of analytic philosophy in Britain” (2017: 78). Somehow, then, Stebbing was erased from the very discipline she played a foundational role in shaping and developing.

We can observe Stebbing’s disappearance from the story of analytic philosophy by taking an informal glance at the historiographical record. Below we find nine influential accounts of analytic philosophy starting from 1956 to 2012. Stebbing appears in the index of only two books here: Urmson’s 1956 *Philosophical Analysis* (four entries) and Passmore’s 1957 *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (sixteen entries).

Year	Title	Author	Stebbing/Stebbing’s Work
1956	<i>Philosophical Analysis: Its Development Between the Two World Wars</i>	J.O. Urmson	Index: 4, Bib/Ref: 3
1957 [1917]	<i>A Hundred Years of Philosophy</i>	John Passmore	Index: 16, Bib/Ref: 4
1958	<i>English Philosophy Since 1900</i>	G.J. Warnock	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 1
1993	<i>Origins of Analytic Philosophy</i>	Michael Dummett	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 0
2000	<i>Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy</i>	Avrum Stroll	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 1
2003	<i>Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Vol. 1: The Founding Giants</i>	Scott Soames	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 0
2003	<i>Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Vol. 2: The Age of Meaning</i>	Scott Soames	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 0
2008	<i>What is Analytic Philosophy</i>	Hans-Johann Glock	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 0
2012	<i>A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy</i>	Stephen P. Schwartz	Index: 0, Bib/Ref: 0

Urmson’s mentions, however, are brief and cursory, though he does credit Stebbing for introducing Logical Positivism to Cambridge in the early 1930s. Comparatively speaking, Passmore’s coverage of Stebbing is more generous, and not just in terms of numbers: two full pages of his compressed but semi-comprehensive 500-page survey of philosophy—from Mill to Ordinary Language Philosophy—are devoted to discussing several of Stebbing’s articles, including “The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics” (1932) (though Passmore unfortunately attributes Stebbing’s article the wrong date and mistakenly refers to it as “The Method of Analysis in Philosophy”).

Aside from the inclusion of Stebbing’s “The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics” in the bibliography of Warnock’s *English Philosophy Since 1900* and a mention of “Moore’s Influence” (1942) in Stroll’s *Twentieth-Century Analytic Phi-*

losophy—Stebbing’s contribution to the Schilpp volume on Moore—Stebbing goes unmentioned and undiscussed in the remaining works above. Unsurprisingly, Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein all have their pride of place.

Stebbing’s erasure from the history of analytic philosophy is due to several factors, both philosophical and sociological.²³ Among philosophical ones, the demise of analysis as a focus of analytic philosophers’ attention, after the 1930s, likely determined a wane of interest in Stebbing’s most important contributions, many of which were on the nature and role of analysis.²⁴ Moreover, Stebbing’s habit of often crediting others, especially Moore, for ideas which were in fact her own, or ostensibly different from those of her colleagues, obscured the originality of her thought and led many to think of her mostly, if not solely, as a “disciple of Moore.”²⁵ There’s also the fact that some of Stebbing’s most interesting post-analysis work is to be found in her books, which were either textbooks or works of public philosophy. But these genres, especially the latter, are ones that philosophers seem to have increasingly become disinterested in, or at least have come to think are unworthy of serious philosophical engagement (although, thankfully, this seems to be changing). Given this, and the fact that much of this work was produced in the last ten years or so of Stebbing’s life, it’s plausible that commentators either overlooked it or ignored it.

Sociological factors include the obvious ones, that women did not have access to elite institutions in the UK (and in many other countries too). Recall that Stebbing was unable to receive an actual degree from Cambridge, let alone teach there, and had to complete her studies and take a position elsewhere, in London, in a context which did not allow her to exert the same influence on colleagues and students. (Cambridge was the hotbed of philosophy during this time.) It’s also worth mentioning that Stebbing died relatively young, at the age of 58. An early death often results in less uptake of one’s work. Gareth Evans and J.L. Austin are victims to similar circumstances, as their untimely deaths arguably put a sharp halt on their influence.

Times are changing, though. Recently, there has been a growing resurgence of interest in Stebbing’s work. Much of this renewed interest is due to the pioneering efforts of Michael Beaney (2003, 2016), Nikolay Milkov (2003), Siobhan Chapman (2013), and Frederique Janssen-Lauret (2017).²⁶ But it’s also a sign of the times:

²³ For a more comprehensive account of the erasure of women philosophers from the analytic tradition, see Connell and Janssen-Lauret (2022) and Verhaegh and Peijnenburg (2022).

²⁴ See also Milkov (2003) who suggests something similar.

²⁵ Ayer (1977: 157–158). See Milkov (2003), Beaney (2016), and Beaney and Chapman (2021).

²⁶ Eric Schliesser has also been blogging about Stebbing for many years on *Digressions and*

a growing interest in figures at the margins, figures of philosophy who have been blurred out, neglected, or otherwise forgotten, as well as the “historical turn” in analytic philosophy,²⁷ which has brought about a wave of interest in studying the works of analytic philosophy in context.

It is in this spirit that we proudly present this volume—the first dedicated exclusively to the philosophy of Susan Stebbing. Through eleven previously unpublished essays, this book examines the full range of Stebbing’s philosophical contributions, reaffirming both her significance within the tradition of analytic philosophy and the enduring relevance of her ideas to issues still under dispute today. Stebbing, we believe, can be considered a “founding mother” of analytic philosophy, whose work should be regularly taught and researched alongside the work of analytic philosophy’s “founding fathers”—Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore and (the early) Ludwig Wittgenstein—and its “grandfather”—Gottlob Frege. Moreover, as we shall see, her engagement with what, nowadays, would be considered “public philosophy,” and her critique of propaganda, as well as her original take on analysis, which prefigures in several ways today’s preoccupations with metaphysics and not just language, and a critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction make her specially attuned to the “metaphysical” as well as the “social turn” taken by analytic philosophy more recently.

2 The Structure and Content of the Volume

2.1 *The Significance of Susan Stebbing’s Work on Analysis*

The volume opens with a section on “The Significance of Susan Stebbing’s Work on Analysis,” containing a chapter by the same title by Annalisa Coliva. Coliva acknowledges the crucial contributions made by Stebbing with respect to the nature and role of analysis in philosophy, the relationship between science, philosophy and common sense, and her role in promoting what, today, would be called “public philosophy,” yet she focuses on the first of these seminal contributions.

According to Coliva, Stebbing’s metaphysical (or what Stebbing called “directional”) analysis was an important and original contribution to the debate about analysis, which occupied philosophers such as Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Wisdom, and others, up to the end of the 1930s. Stebbing, Coliva argues, was clearer than any of her contemporaries about the various kinds of analysis—postulational, definitional, clarificatory, and directional. Whilst the former three

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²⁷ See Reck (2013: 1–36).

essentially concern language, concepts, and propositions, the last one is distinctively metaphysical, and cannot be conducted solely a priori, according to Stebbing.

Connectedly, Stebbing was critical of those philosophers who thought that analysis could only aim at the clarification of the meaning of our ordinary words, or that it could be conducted merely by a priori means, or that analysis could subvert our commonsensical belief in the existence of physical objects. Metaphysical analysis, as she originally argued, distancing herself from all her colleagues, including Moore, aims at revealing the ultimate truth-makers of our true judgments. In Stebbing's words: "metaphysics aims at making precise the reference of all true beliefs" (1932-33: 70). If carried out, such analysis would thus contribute to our knowledge of the world and to the clarification of our thoughts. It must be stressed that, according to Stebbing, neither the objects that our commonsensical beliefs are about nor their ultimate truth-makers would be, in any sense, our construction. As she aptly quipped in "Logical Positivism and Analysis" (1933: 34): "*points* and *electrons* may be constructs, *tables* certainly are not." Even if at a deeper level of analysis it turns out that tables are composed of electrons, that does not mean that they are inferred from them, or that they are reducible to them, or that they have the properties of their constituents (e.g., lack of solidity); even less that the word "table" should be understood as a shorthand for a definite description ranging over such particles of physics, let alone sense data, *à la* Russell.

In this respect, according to Coliva, Stebbing may thus be seen as a precursor of the denial of the analytic/synthetic distinction. That is, according to Stebbing, we cannot hope to clarify our thoughts merely based on a priori, conceptual, even less, merely linguistic reflection. Rather, conceptual clarifications will be intertwined with empirical and even scientific discoveries (like in the case of the concept of simultaneity after Einstein's relativity theory) and will depend on what basic facts in the world make our commonsensical beliefs about physical objects true.

Still, Stebbing was also acutely aware of the limitations of metaphysical analysis. In particular, she denounced as problematic the ungrounded assumption that such basic facts exist and that we may be able to identify them. Indeed, after her seminal "The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics" (1932-33) she became increasingly aware of this problem, up to her stark rejection of metaphysical analysis in "Moore's Influence" where she stated: "I think there are good reasons for saying that the notion of basic facts is a hang-over from the days when 'the problem of the external world' was envisaged as primarily a problem of justifying common sense beliefs" (1942: 57). This passage was preceded a few years earlier

by the remark in “Some Puzzles about Analysis”: “I tried to show that, once the assumptions [of metaphysical analysis] were explicitly stated, they did not seem very plausible. It appears that I entirely failed to make this contention clear, for several writers have subsequently taken me to have been defending the use of the method of analysis in metaphysics” (1938–39: 72).

In the second chapter of this first section, Eric Schliesser, in his contribution, “Stebbing on Clarity,” focuses on an often-neglected kind of analysis Stebbing had discerned, namely what she called the *analytic clarification of a concept* (see Stebbing 1933). A paradigmatic example of it is Einstein’s treatment of simultaneity. This kind of clarification is introduced to “handle instances where a previously relatively successful scientific theory requires non-trivial revision after what we would now call a ‘paradigm change’” (Schliesser 7). In these cases, we may say something true even if we do not quite well know what we mean; for it is only after this kind of scientific discovery that what a concept like that of simultaneity amounts to becomes clear. Hence, according to Schliesser, “an analytic clarification can (or is) the *effect* of scientific development. The clarity achieved is the product of the growth of science” (Schliesser 7). Thus, he quips, “‘Analytic clarification of a concept’ may be in the running for the worst philosophical coinage for failure to convey what it is trying to describe!” (Schliesser 7).

This kind of clarification, however, “does not merely impact the scientific image, it also shifts the manifest image” (Schliesser 8). This happens gradually, but it entails that common sense too can “shift like quicksand” (Schliesser 8). This is yet another difference between Stebbing and Moore, for the latter, contrary to Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, was very careful to avoid reference to truisms that could somewhat be seen as the product of scientific investigation percolated within common sense. Finally, since science is open-ended and a communal enterprise, the analytic clarification of a concept may be distributed among scientists and may be subject to continuous changes. Thus, according to Schliesser, “lurking in Stebbing’s philosophy, [there is] a call for a kind of individual humility” (Schliesser 9), including individual scientists.

Schliesser then turns to what he dubs “democratic clarity,” which he finds defended in Stebbing’s *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939). While this is the topic of two other papers in the third section of this volume, and its content will be expanded upon shortly, it merits note that he thinks that, in light of her previous discussion of the analytic clarification of a concept, Stebbing is strangely oblivious to the fact that political parties may play the role of experts in the division of cognitive labor and that deference to them may be a valuable heuristic that allows “individuals to remain in partial darkness while being part of collectives that can

act with sufficient enough effectiveness” (Schliesser 18). In other words, while Stebbing saw clearly that clarity could sometimes not be obtained by individual thinkers, she nevertheless preached it as an ideal in her later work, despite the fact that on many topics we can do no more and no better than defer to authorities.

2.2 *Public Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense*

Stebbing was very interested in physics and in its momentous developments at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since she could not formally pursue it due to her disability (which precluded her from spending hours in a lab), she self-taught a great deal of it. In the 1920s, moreover, influenced by Whitehead’s philosophy of science, she started to consider the relationship between modern physics—relativity theory and quantum theory especially—and common sense. In *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) Stebbing criticizes religious and idealist interpretations of modern physics as put forward by Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jeans.²⁸ Stebbing thus places philosophy at the service of dispelling the confusions she identified in various interpretations of modern physics—an effort that, today, would be recognized as part of what we call “public philosophy.”

Consistent with her work on analysis, Stebbing was especially critical of conflating the levels of common sense and everyday language with the level of physical analysis and scientific language. As a result of such conflation, Eddington famously claimed that there are “two tables! ... One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years ... it has extension, it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all, it is substantial [i.e. solid] ... Table No. 2 is my scientific table ... There is nothing substantial about my second table. It is nearly all empty space” (Eddington 1928: xi-xii). According to Stebbing, in contrast, there is only one table—the macro properties of which are described by Eddington with reference to his table No. 1, including solidity. While its constituents, as revealed by physics, are mostly sub-atomic particles arranged in largely empty space, Stebbing argues that it would be a mistake to infer the properties of the whole from those of its constituents. Thus, it is entirely coherent to claim that the table is solid, even though its constituents are not.

It also merits note that Stebbing didn’t think that contemporary physics could adjudicate between idealism and materialism. Its findings, according to her, are compatible with both interpretations, and further empirical inquiries and

²⁸ A passage from Eddington is representative. “All through the physical world,” Eddington remarks, “runs that unknown content, which must surely be the stuff of our consciousness” (1928: 200).

levels of analysis would be needed to adjudicate the issue. Notice, however, that precisely in virtue of the fact that the properties of a whole cannot be inferred from those of its constituents, even if the latter were mental or spiritual in nature, it wouldn't follow that physical objects, as mind-independent entities, didn't exist, or that did not have the properties that common sense assigns to them.

Such themes are further examined by Frederique Janssen-Lauret in her chapter “Susan Stebbing’s Anti-Idealist Philosophy of Physics: Her Rebuttal of Eddington’s Argument from Intrinsic Nature.” Janssen-Lauret challenges the received “Moorean” reading of Stebbing, that Stebbing was a “follower of Moore” or a committed Moorean of sorts,²⁹ arguing that such readings are misplaced and that the differences between Moore and Stebbing become clearer by considering Stebbing’s innovative contributions to analysis and its relationship to the philosophy of science, which Janssen-Lauret argues are at odds with Moore’s view. To bring these differences into sharper contrast, Janssen-Lauret focuses specifically on Stebbing’s objections to Eddington’s argument from intrinsic nature in *Philosophy and the Physicists*: that all matter is conscious (a view that we would now recognize as panpsychism) and, moreover, that our best physical theories support this conclusion. Janssen-Lauret shows that Stebbing doesn’t rebut Eddington’s argument by invoking any Moorean maneuvers—that is, by showing that we have reason to reject such a thesis because it offends common sense or because, upon analysis, such a thesis results in paradox. Rather, Stebbing concedes that our best physical theories are compatible with idealism, but that nevertheless Eddington’s premises don’t provide a positive reason to believe this conclusion. Stebbing’s rebuttal turns on the rejection of two ideas that are implicitly assumed in Eddington’s argument: that the nature of a thing’s parts is inherited by the nature of the whole, and that metaphysical analysis and “same-level” (conceptual) analysis are the same. Yet, as we’ve seen Stebbing argue, both these assumptions are fallacious.

As commentators like Janssen-Lauret have drawn much attention to, the relationship between Stebbing and Moore, particularly with respect to common sense philosophy, is elusive in many ways. While Stebbing never tires of crediting Moore for many ideas, in fact they had quite different views, certainly about analysis, as we just briefly considered (see Coliva 2021 and Janssen-Lauret 2022: 36–37), but also about common sense philosophy. Stebbing’s commonsensical starting points were much more tied to perception than Moore’s. In addition, Stebbing was interested in the relationship between physics and common sense, whereas Moore never addressed the relationship between science and common

²⁹ See footnote 25.

sense and rather used the latter, and the realism he saw inherent in it, to oppose idealism and skepticism.

In his “Making Sense of Stebbing and Moore on Common Sense,” Louis Doulas steps back to reconsider these issues and reexamine the direction of influence between Moore and Stebbing. As it turns out, things aren’t so straightforward. Both “Moorean” and “anti-Moorean” readings of Stebbing uncritically assume a conception of Moorean common sense that, Doulas urges, is overly simplified. As a result, the reasons for favoring a “Moorean” reading of Stebbing—or for that matter *resisting* such a reading—are both misplaced. Doulas demonstrates that Moore’s account of common sense isn’t monolithic but shifts over the course of his philosophical development, between what Doulas calls “ecumenical” and “sectarian” conceptions. These correspond, respectively, to a lesser-known Moorean conception of common sense and a more orthodox one. This explains why commentators are tempted to distance Stebbing from Moore: they assume the latter (orthodox) conception is representative of his view. For the same reason, it also explains why commentators are too quick to attribute Moorean views to Stebbing. However, as Doulas argues, the period in which Stebbing is most clearly influenced by Moore aligns with the former, less familiar conception of common sense. Despite Moore’s influence, Doulas contends that Stebbing ultimately develops her own distinctive common sense program. Unlike Moore’s, Stebbing’s common sense program is “more Quinean than Archimedean” (Doulas 26), where common sense knowledge is understood as *probable knowledge* continuous with the scientific enterprise.

As noted, *Philosophy and the Physicists* is a work of public philosophy. It therefore makes for an interesting case study in that genre, raising a number of questions about how philosophy ought to be done in the public eye—especially when it engages with figures and ideas outside of philosophy, as Stebbing so does in *Philosophy and the Physicists*—as well as the value that philosophy can bring to the broader public. While *Philosophy and the Physicists* was generally favorably reviewed,³⁰ many reviewers felt its biggest shortcoming was that it offered no positive contribution. Indeed, readers of *Philosophy and the Physicists* will know that Stebbing’s critique of Eddington and Jeans is quite scathing; “a devastating refutation of the philosophical confusions of the scientists” writes one reviewer.³¹ Stebbing’s unforgiving tone throughout the book can easily be read as defensiveness.

³⁰ Within philosophical circles at least. Outside of such circles, the book was more harshly reviewed. See Chapman (2013: 116-119).

³¹ See Burns (1938).

Seizing upon this aspect of *Philosophy and the Physicists*, in “Susan Stebbing’s Critique of Popular Science: Guiding or Gatekeeping?” Karl Egerton writes that “one might feel unease [with *Philosophy and the Physicists*] which seems either a defensive move on philosophers’ behalf, arguing that scientists ought to leave certain work to them, or an attempt to school scientists on the significance of their own results” (Egerton 2). This, for Egerton, raises the following pressing question: is Stebbing’s contribution in *Philosophy and the Physicists* “guiding” or “gatekeeping”? Egerton ultimately argues that Stebbing’s intervention is guiding, and that she keeps in check the overexcitement produced by the “new” physics brought to the early twentieth century. Indeed, the metaphors and equivocations that Eddington and Jeans hide behind obscure and obfuscate the premises from which they draw their conclusions, conclusions that are in the end, according to Stebbing, not actually warranted. For Egerton, then, *Philosophy and the Physicists* is a necessary intervention into philosophical speculation gone astray and unchecked.

Closing this section of the volume, Peter West further examines the regulatory role of the *Philosophy and the Physicists* that Egerton alludes to above. In “Stebbing’s Pelicans: Public Philosophy in *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose*” West compares *Philosophy and the Physicists* to another of Stebbing’s public philosophy works: *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939). These books can seem quite different from one another at first glance. *Philosophy and the Physicists*, after all, is concerned with undoing the philosophical muddles arising out of the revisionary metaphysical views that two prominent scientists hastily “read off” of the new physics. *Thinking to Some Purpose*, by contrast, is a kind of handbook that endeavors to defend democratic ideals by instructing people how to think more clearly by paying attention to how language is used by politicians and journalists (and the media more broadly). Yet, West argues that these books are largely of a piece and are, in fact, part of a unified philosophical project: “that of ensuring that the citizens of a democracy are in a position to think clearly” (West ##). West then goes on to develop Stebbing’s philosophy of public philosophy, contrasting it with another great popularizer of philosophy, Bertrand Russell, and his own approach. Russell, according to West, has a loftier vision of public philosophy than Stebbing, promoting the Aristotelian idea that leading a good life entails cultivating and accruing wisdom: “that if everyone were equipped with philosophical training ... there would be considerably fewer disputes and ... we would all lead more peaceful and fulfilling lives” (West ##). Loftier, however, doesn’t necessarily mean better. As West remarks, while Russell’s vision is much more idealistic, Stebbing’s is much more practical and actionable. Unlike Russell, Stebbing offers her readers *actual* tools for philosophical thinking—how

to detect fallacies in the speeches of politicians and spot inconsistencies in news stories, among other things. That is, Stebbing adopts what West calls a “skills and training” approach to public philosophy, rather than a “transfer of knowledge” approach in which a non-specialist is presented with simplified or condensed introductions to certain philosophical theses and arguments by some expert specialist. According to West, Stebbing “focuses on the *way* we think rather than *what* certain philosophers think or have thought” (West ##). “After all,” remarks West, “for Stebbing, all thinking is *thinking to some purpose*” (West ##). And this is just as true of *Thinking to Some Purpose* as it is for *Philosophy and the Physicists*.

2.3 *The Logic and Politics of Everyday Language*

The third section of the book is titled “The Logic and Politics of Everyday Language.” With the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s, Stebbing took an active role in supporting Jewish colleagues in finding academic jobs. She also admitted many Jewish refugee children at the school in London she had founded with her sister and friends. Not only was she an activist against nazi-fascism, but she also contributed to public philosophy by considering her duty to help counter the effects of political propaganda by writing a book of critical thinking aimed at the general public. The book appeared in print in 1939, with the title *Thinking to Some Purpose*. With examples from political debates of her time, Stebbing denounced several common fallacies which are regularly present in political propaganda, such as special pleading and what she called “potted thinking”—that is, simplistic thinking that betrays what others are saying and makes it susceptible to facile rebuttal. The aim of the work was thus to help people think clearly and, by so doing, become free—that is, capable of forming independent, considered judgements—rather than be surreptitiously influenced and deceived by political propaganda.

Stebbing’s unfaltering faith in the civic role of philosophy—including logic—is here considered from a variety of perspectives. Nikolay Milkov’s “Susan Stebbing and Some Poorly Explored Venues of Analytic Philosophy” claims that “like nobody else before or after her” (Milkov 2) she considered “the ultimate objective of analytic philosophy ... to obtain a clear and precise grasp of words’ and phrases’ meaning in order to improve human *thinking*” (Milkov 5). That, in turn, was at the service of “apprehend[ing] how the *facts* were interconnected and how they developed” (Milkov 5).

According to Milkov, Stebbing was a “logical interventionist” *ante litteram*, for she thought that logic was not just an exploration of abstract systems but could be brought to bear on problems and issues of modern life. Starting with her *Logic in Practice* (1934), she considered examples from everyday life to illustrate

logical principles. In *Thinking to Some Purpose*—Stebbing’s most famous work aimed at bringing logic to bear onto real-life issues—she maintained that “to think logically is to think relevantly to the purpose that initiated the thinking” (1939: 10), based on exact connections between the relevant facts. Whereas in the *Philosophy and the Physicists*, Stebbing had applied her conception of analytic philosophy to clarifying the muddles caused by trying to convey “exact thought” with “inexact language” (1937: 14), in *Thinking to Some Purpose* she attacked “the tricks of the fascist totalitarian ideology and its propaganda” (Milkov 8). In her view, “propaganda was just a weak form of argument” (Milkov 8).

Furthermore, Stebbing held that politics is a battle of *ideals* which are neither categorical imperatives nor principles, but “regulative ideas” and are “relative a priori” (Milkov 8), so that they may and do change in time. In *Ideals and Illusions* (1941), Stebbing denounced religion as an illusion, whereas she considered democracy a true ideal. According to her, democracy consists in “freedom, respect for other men issuing in tolerance and humanity, respect for truth and delight in knowledge” (1941: 151). Democracy considers all human beings equal and aims at everyone’s happiness. By contrast, Nazi and Fascists pursued ideals that are contrary to democracy, which should be fought against and replaced with true ones.

In “Susan Stebbing and the Politics of Symbolic Logic,” David Dunning too considers Stebbing a logical interventionist, but more a “dialogical” one than an umpire. Her political aims did not manifest themselves in aligning logic to a specific political agenda. Rather, she thought of it as a professional discipline, with respect to which there are different levels of proficiency, the basics of which should be taught to everyone. That is to say, logic, for Stebbing, should be part of general education, even if the highest peaks of it could be pursued only by (prospective) professional logicians. Before *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing had thought of logic as a “science of pure forms, not of individual reasoning” (Dunning 7). Due to the political changes in the late 1930s, Stebbing took a more practical turn and stated that “it is, we need to remember, persons who think, not purely rational spirits” (1939: 21). She was fully aware that politicians are more interested in persuasion than in proof and that their audiences are in general not well equipped to follow arguments. Yet, she could not condone a “complacent attitude towards this deficiency” (Dunning 8). Democracy, for Stebbing, is worthwhile only if people cast their vote after “due deliberation” (1939: 11), which can be achieved only by knowing the facts, assessing the evidence for them, and by being able to discount “the effects of prejudice and to evade the distortion produced by unwarrantable fears and by unrealizable hopes” (1939: 11). This is what thinking “relevantly” or “to some purpose” consists in. Teaching

logic, therefore, was a powerful political tool, according to Stebbing, as it could help counter the effects of political propaganda and be at the service of making people free.

2.4 *Natural Language, Definitions, and Verbal Disputes*

Finally, in the book's fourth section, "Natural Language, Definitions, and Verbal Disputes," Stebbing's views on natural language are examined. Contrary to mainstream early analytic philosophy, and to the methodological commitments of key figures of the Cambridge school, such as Russell and the early Wittgenstein, who were following in Frege's footsteps, Stebbing paid close attention to natural language in its own right. She was fully aware of the discrepancies between natural language and logic with respect to connectives (e.g., "and," "or," "if then," etc.), which she treated at length in several of her logic textbooks. Yet, she did not think that natural language had to be reformed or regimented, but rather studied for its own sake. She thus anticipated key moves characteristic of later Oxford ordinary language philosophy, as well as of the pragmatic turn in the philosophy of language. Furthermore, in *Thinking to Some Purpose*, by analyzing political discourse with the aim of unveiling its implicit ideological commitments made to pass as common sense, she anticipated key moves of Critical discourse analysis in linguistics.

In her "Susan Stebbing: Philosophy, Pragmatics and Critical Discourse Analysis," Siobhan Chapman focuses on Stebbing's original outlook on natural language. She stresses how Stebbing's treatment of material implication as unsuitable to convey the meaning of "if then" in natural language, where "the meaning of the premise must be relevantly connected with the meaning of the conclusion" (Stebbing 1943: 145), prefigured a key move in subsequent relevance theory, developed over fifty years later by Sperber and Wilson (1995). For Stebbing recognized that relevance is outside the scope of logic but held that it is worth studying in its own right. Furthermore, in *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing undertook a detailed analysis of ordinary language by looking at "newspaper reports, political speeches and advertisements" to reveal "the ideology behind the production of such texts and the persuasive devices employed in them" (Chapman 1). This was highly unusual at her time and anticipated by several decades a key tenet of Critical discourse analysis, which studies the relationship between language, power, and ideology by looking at concrete linguistic sources. Beside commenting on specific words' choices, she denounced "potted thinking"—that is oversimplified, simplistic thinking—and the (mis)use of analogies. As Quassim Cassam recognizes, Stebbing was thus acutely aware of what he calls "epistemic vices" and was "right to insist that some of our failures in thinking can be over-

come and that there is an urgent need to overcome them to the extent that this is possible” (Cassam 2019: 187).

Bryan Pickel in “Stebbing on Linguistic Convention: Understanding, Definition, and Verbal Disputes” reconstructs Stebbing’s views on linguistic convention across several of her texts, thereby illuminating important features of her philosophy of language—a somewhat elusive and neglected topic in Stebbing exegesis—and how such features bear on various aspects of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Pickel takes readers on a tour through Stebbing’s account of linguistic sign and symbols, sentence meaning, definition, among other similar topics. Undergirding each of these topics, however, is Stebbing’s views about the conventionality of language, the idea that “[w]ords bear no inherent relations to their referents” Pickel writes, paraphrasing Stebbing (Pickel 11). Indeed, that language is conventional seems like a truism hardly worth stating. Yet, this innocuous sounding thesis has been used by philosophers to derive radical philosophical conclusions—that, for example, necessity and certainty can be explained by convention (A.J. Ayer) or that the principles of logic are themselves conventional (C.I. Lewis).

Stebbing, however, finds such conclusions hasty, ultimately turning on misconceptions about the nature of linguistic convention. For example, it might be thought that the conventionality of language has a kind of “trickle down” effect, rendering arbitrary related notions in the vicinity like *definition*. But while language may be conventional, definition isn’t. Writes Pickel on Stebbing: “even though language is conventional, the process of definition requires substantive investigation [into] the referents of the expressions” (Pickel 8). While allowing that there may be cases in which an arbitrary definition may be given or simply stipulated, there is still no guarantee that the definition will be true “and thus no guarantee that the defining and defined expressions are equivalent” (Pickel 8). In this way, Pickel sees Stebbing as anticipating Quine’s discussions of “legislative definition.” A physicist, for example, might legislatively *define* an expression for a force, yet be led to reject it as false after discovering that nothing corresponds to it. As Pickel explains, given that for both Quine and Stebbing legislative definitions are corrigible, it would be a mistake to characterize them as strictly conventional.

Picking up on related linguistic themes in Stebbing’s work, Teresa Kouri Kissel’s chapter “Stebbing, Translations, and Verbal Disputes” argues that Stebbing may have to some extent anticipated present day discussing concerning the philosophical significance of merely verbal disputes—that is, debates that are taken to be neither substantive nor deep and that seem largely terminological. The source, Kouri Kissel reveals, is found in a somewhat unexpected place: Stebbing’s *Ideals and Illusions* (1941). While Stebbing’s concerns in that book are largely

of a piece with the themes of *Thinking to Some Purpose* (that clear and critical thinking go hand in hand with social emancipation) Kouri Kissel nevertheless shows that, after some necessary modification and augmentation—which, as Kouri Kissel argues, Stebbing’s previous work on analysis has the resources to provide—what we get is a compelling translation test that seems to predict when a specific debate is a merely verbal one. This is what Kouri Kissel calls Stebbing’s “directional translation test.” Though the context in which Stebbing’s test is developed is no doubt different from contemporary discussions of merely verbal disputes, Stebbing’s directional translation test nevertheless appears to solve some problems that have been raised for David Chalmers’s own more formal test for merely verbal disputes. Indeed, as Kouri Kissel urges, Chalmers can address these worries by incorporating Stebbing’s insights. As such, Stebbing emerges as “an integral member of the tradition that gives rise to the idea of merely verbal disputes, and should be treated as such” (Kouri Kissel 17).

We think the preceding should have made abundantly clear that, far from being a marginal figure, Stebbing was clearly a founding mother of analytic philosophy, whose ideas are of relevance also to present-day debates and particularly attuned to the “social turn” analytic philosophy has taken in the last few years. If some reasons could be adduced to explain why she did disappear from the canon after her death, such as the demise of the centrality of analysis amongst the core issues of analytic philosophy, this volume should make apparent that there are none, nowadays, to not reinstate Stebbing where she belongs.

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For a comprehensive biography and bibliography of Stebbing's works see Chapman (2013).

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