

SUSAN STEBBING AND THE LANGUAGE OF COMMON SENSE¹

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Lizzie Susan Stebbing (1885-1943) was an important figure in the beginning of the twentieth century, specially in view of her role in the development of analytic philosophy and particularly because she was the first woman Professor of Philosophy in a British university. In *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, Siobhan Chapman, Professor of English at the University of Liverpool (UK), brings us a detailed historical analysis of Stebbing's life and of her philosophical developments. The book, divided into nine chapters, provides a lot of information on Stebbing's personal, academic and political life as well as on her philosophical ideas and commitments. Given that, for a better analysis of the book it is possible to divide it into three main parts: (i) historical importance of Stebbing; (ii) philosophical context of her academic life; and (iii) importance

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of her philosophical conceptions, mainly, the logical-linguistic.

Stebbing was born in 1885 and she was registered in Barnet, in London. About her young life, Chapman (2013, p. 10) says that she was a delicate child, suffering from an illness called Menière's Disease. Her ill health and periods of enforced inactivity continued into her adult life and many times she was unable to work because of this unstable health. In the first years, because she wasn't strong enough for full-time schooling, she was educated privately at home and afterwards she went to James Allen's Girl's School, in London. After finishing high school, she was admitted at Girton College in Cambridge, and she graduated in 1908. Finishing College in Cambridge, she went to King's College, London, to take her MA in Moral Science, until 1912.

As a student, Stebbing was influenced by the works of F. H. Bradley, B. Russell, A. F. Whitehead and, mainly, G. E. Moore. In her first philosophical works she shows a great interest in analytical philosophy, specially the relations between natural language and formal logic. Furthermore, at that time she demonstrated a great interest in debates between idealists and realists, and even in her young life she showed an ambitious personality, trying to identify the mistakes in the two approaches. Her MA's thesis was entitled *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* and already in this initial work she indicates her commitments with the relations between the notions of action, language and the theory of knowledge. Stebbing argued, as explained by Chapman (p. 28), that action and thought, intellect and will cannot be opposed. This is significant because in her mature books, the relations between natural language, formal logic and the

purposes of speech are recurrent and a guide to understand her main philosophical conceptions.

According to Chapman (p. 37) during the decade or so following her MA graduation, Stebbing established herself as an important voice in the philosophical discussions in Cambridge and London. She was engaged in debates with the leading philosophic figures in Britain at that time and her work was read and discussed frequently by them. In 1931 she became president of the Mind Association and a few years later of the Aristotelian Society. Due to the increase of her reputation and the quality of her work, in the summer of 1933, Susan Stebbing was honoured with a place at the University of London as Professor of Philosophy. However, if today a woman being a Professor in a University stands as a normal fact, at that time it was not trivial: Stebbing was the first woman Professor of Philosophy in a University in Great Britain. Women's rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were limited, including the positions in universities. For this reason, Stebbing can be considered as a milestone in the fight for equal rights between men and women. Chapman, in several instances, particularly in the first chapters, calls attention to this event. In Chapter Four (p. 79) she says: "In its historical and cultural context, Stebbing's appointment as full Professor of Philosophy really was headline news. Women were by now an established presence, although certainly a minority one, in academia, but their place there was hard-won and still controversial". Unfortunately, as expect, her appointment did not please everyone.

Anyway, Stebbing remained Professor in London until

1938. During this period, she published several books on logic and language. The most important books are *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930, 1933, the first edition was published before the appointment), *Philosophy and The Physicists* (1937), *Thinking to some purpose* (1939, the most popular of her books), *Ideals and Illusions* (1941) and *A Modern Elementary Logic* (1943). In all these, Stebbing focuses on a logical analysis of the natural language and related issues.

The philosophical context of the beginning of twentieth century in Britain was predominantly influenced by analytical philosophy. The new developments in logic and language arrived in philosophical discussions and the analytic methodology became the common ground for solving classical problems. Frege, Russell, Moore, Carnap, Wittgenstein and others were the central figures in that time (in logical and analytical context, of course) and their works changed the way in which philosophical questions were considered. The mathematical logic was a development of traditional Aristotelian syllogistic and one of its main goals was to construct a formal language for science that would be able to avoid the errors and imperfections of natural language. The basic idea was that with a perfect formal language to express thought it would be possible to solve philosophical problems, because many of these problems actually originated in our imperfect ordinary language use.

Susan Stebbing's academic formation was basically analytical and she read and kept direct contact with some of these figures, in particular, Moore and Russell. In *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, for instance, Stebbing introduces the recent developments in mathematical logic. According to

Chapman (p. 50), “Stebbing proceeds to offer her readers an overview both of traditional Aristotelian logic and of recent developments, and also to introduce them to some of the current issues in scientific method, including the problems surrounding deduction and induction”. In this sense, Stebbing is located in a transitional moment in the history of logic: before Frege and Russell, logic was equated with the Aristotelian syllogistic; after them mathematical logic became central. Stebbing, despite her acceptance of mathematical logic, affords space in her books to the traditional logical analysis as well.

Chapman’s Chapter 4 and, mainly, Chapter 5 present a detailed reconstruction of the philosophical context in which Stebbing worked. Chapter 5, *Logical Positivism and Philosophy of Language*, is an excellent read for everyone who wants to know more about logical positivism, particularly because Wittgenstein (an “associate” of the Vienna Circle) was of great influence in Stebbing’s conceptions and also because the first time that Carnap went to UK was by invitation of Stebbing. The relations between Stebbing and the positivists was closer, but also have several philosophical disagreements. According to Chapman (p. 84) in *Logical Positivism and Analysis* (1933), she sets out what she sees as the main claims of the logical positivism. For her the most attractive characteristic in Wittgenstein and in the logical positivists was “the insistence on analysis as the philosopher’s main tool in searching for clarity and unmasking as simply nonsensical some of the questions that philosophers had traditionally posed themselves”. To the Vienna Circle, the analysis of the sentences can show what sentences have

meaning and what sentences haven't. A sentence is meaningful only in one of the three following cases: (i) if it is analytic, i.e., if this meaning is determined by the language; (ii) if it is a logical or mathematics sentence; or (iii) if it can be, in principle, verified by observation.

Although Stebbing agreed with some of the positivists ideas, she was a critic of other aspects of their philosophical conceptions, in special the conception of analysis. According to her, the way in which the positivists perform analysis is problematic. Positivist approaches fail to observe different kinds of analysis. They consider that all analysis is necessarily linguistic analysis. As Chapman explains (p. 85), "for Stebbing, using language to analyse language involves philosophers in an unproductive and circular activity". Furthermore, the purpose of analysis is to clarify existing beliefs, not justify them. Another point of disagreement with the members of the Vienna Circle was about metaphysics. For them, all metaphysical sentences haven't cognitive content: metaphysical sentences are unable to fall in any of the three kinds listed before. They are not analytical, not logical and not observable, in principle, by experience. On the other hand, due the influence of Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, Stebbing sustains an atomistic conception of propositions, namely, that there are basic atomic sentences that constitute the world.

The popularity of Stebbing grew in the 1940's especially because of *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939). In this book, she presents a rich analysis of the way that we think and how we can avoid the illogicalities in the speech of other people and in our own. Written at the beginning of the World War II, the book affords space to discuss some "examples

taken from the speeches of politicians and from politically loaded newspaper reports and is explicitly aimed at promoting a discerning and critical attitude in the electorate” (p. 120). So, the book, focuses, among other things, also in the political context of England when WWII started.

However, the central idea is that we need to make clear our reasoning and a logical analysis of the ordinary speech could show where the mistakes are. The point is very simple: we talk unclearly, because we think unclearly. Then, to talk in a clear way, we need to consider the way that we think. According to Stebbing (1939, p.22), thinking logically (reflexively) is thinking to some purpose. In her own words, “to pursue an aim without considering what its realizations would involve is stupid”. In this sense, thinking involves asking questions and trying to find answers to these questions. When we think logically, we think relevantly to the purpose that initiated the thinking. The process of reflective thinking consists in pondering upon a set of facts so as to elicit their connections. This process is known as inferring. The various stages in the process are related to the conclusion as the grounds upon which it is based. Stebbing calls these grounds “premises”. In short, effective thinking is directed to an end. Consequently, there is a teleological commitment in all properly reflexive thinking.

According to Chapman (p. 183), Stebbing was concerned in special with the analysis of language primarily as a window to the process of thinking that it expressed. By the language we can determine if this process is logical or otherwise. Books like *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930), *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), *Ideals and Illusions* (1941)

and *A Modern Elementary Logic* (1943) contains some important ideas which became central in subsequent discussions in Ordinary Language Philosophy and in Pragmatics. Stebbing's philosophical motivations were very similar to those of philosophers of the first generation of ordinary language, like J. Austin, H. P. Grice, and Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

In the last chapter of the book, Chapter 9, *Stebbing, Philosophy and Linguistics*, Chapman shows us, in a very clear way, the relations between Stebbing's work and the following developments in Philosophy of Language and the discussions of language in general. Throughout her work, it is possible to identify several passages when Stebbing sustains positions that only some years later were systematically considered. As Chapman says "her attentiveness to how words, even the most philosophically loaded ones, are used and understood in everyday life inevitably invites comparisons with ordinary language philosophy. Her insistence that analysis must have real examples of language in use, have resonances with some very recent approaches in linguistics, particularly with critical discourse analysis". Stebbing's handbooks on logic, *A Modern Introduction to Logic* and *A Modern Elementary Logic*, consider both the analysis of mathematic logic as well the ordinary language, the common sense language.

Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense is a book that deserves attention. It is a very interesting book that brings us important information about the development of analytical philosophy in the beginning of the twentieth century in Britain. Chapman organized the book in a

chronologically way that helps the reader to understand the development of Stebbing's ideas. The language and the way in which the philosophical conceptions are presented are quite clear. In special, in my opinion, this book has as a great worth the capacity to find on a nearly forgotten philosopher views that are actual. Although today Stebbing is unfamiliar for most philosophical students, in her works we can find very stimulating analysis and views that remain current. Stebbing contributed to the development of logic and philosophy of language, so her writings cannot be disregarded. According to Chapman (p. 186) "Stebbing's work as a whole is best assessed in relation to the various directions taken in the decades that followed her death by the serious study of human language". Furthermore, her historical figure is symbolic in the pursuit for equal rights between men and women not only in the universities, but in all fields.

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