HISTORY OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

SUSAN STEBBING AND THE LANGUAGE OF COMMON SENSE

SIOBHAN CHAPMAN

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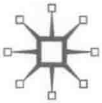

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Series Editor's Foreword

During the first half of the twentieth century, analytic philosophy gradually established itself as the dominant tradition in the English-speaking world, and over the last few decades it has taken firm root in many other parts of the world. There has been increasing debate over just what 'analytic philosophy' means, as the movement has ramified into the complex tradition that we know today, but the influence of the concerns, ideas and methods of early analytic philosophy on contemporary thought is indisputable. All this has led to greater self-consciousness among analytic philosophers about the nature and origins of their tradition and scholarly interest in its historical development and philosophical foundations has blossomed in recent years, with the result that history of analytic philosophy is now recognised as a major field of philosophy in its own right.

The main aim of the series in which the present book appears, the first series of its kind, is to create a venue for work on the history of analytic philosophy, consolidating the area as a major field of philosophy and promoting further research and debate. The 'history of analytic philosophy' is understood broadly, as covering the period from the last three decades of the nineteenth century to the start of the twenty-first century, beginning with the work of Frege, Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein, who are generally regarded as its main founders, and the influences upon them, and going right up to the most recent developments. In allowing the 'history' to extend to the present, the aim is to encourage engagement with contemporary debates in philosophy, for example, in showing how the concerns of early analytic philosophy relate to current concerns. In focusing on analytic philosophy, the aim is not to exclude comparisons with other – earlier or contemporary – traditions, or consideration of figures or themes that some might regard as marginal to the analytic tradition but which also throw light on analytic philosophy. Indeed, a further aim of the series is to deepen our understanding of the broader context in which analytic philosophy developed, by looking, for example, at the roots of analytic philosophy in neo-Kantianism or British idealism, or the connections between analytic philosophy and phenomenology, or discussing the work of philosophers who were important in the development of analytic philosophy but who are now often forgotten.

One philosopher who certainly played a central role in the development of analytic philosophy but who has not yet received the recognition she deserves is Susan (L. S.) Stebbing (1885–1943). Educated at Cambridge, she maintained connections with Cambridge throughout her life but taught primarily at Bedford College, London, where she was appointed to a lectureship in philosophy in 1920, becoming Professor in 1933. The first woman in Britain to hold a chair in philosophy, she was President of the Aristotelian Society in 1933–1934 and President of the Mind Association in 1934–1935. She was also Visiting Professor at Columbia University, New York, in 1931–1932, and helped found *Analysis*, now recognized as one of the flagship journals of analytic philosophy, in 1933. In 1934 she invited Rudolf Carnap to speak in London, where Carnap met both Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer for the first time. She thus had a role not only in establishing analytic philosophy (in its Cambridge variety) in Britain but also in introducing analytic philosophy to America and logical positivism (the other main strand of analytic philosophy in the 1930s) to Britain.

Stebbing's writings were no less important than her professional activities. In 1930 she published *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, which can be regarded as the first textbook of analytic philosophy. An expanded second edition appeared in 1933, and further editions throughout the 1940s. A more elementary text on logic, for first-year students, followed in 1943, the year she died after a brave battle with cancer. Among other books, she also wrote *Thinking to Some Purpose*, which was published in 1939 by Penguin Books (founded just a few years earlier), with the aim of encouraging people to think more clearly and critically. She was a regular contributor to *Analysis*, *Mind* and the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, discussing topics at the forefront of analytic philosophy, such as truth, facts, existence, logical constructions and the nature of analysis and writing many book reviews.

The present volume, by Siobhan Chapman, is the first monograph devoted to the life and work of Susan Stebbing. Not only does she provide the fullest account to date of Stebbing's life, but she also discusses the entire range of Stebbing's work, from her MA dissertation on pragmatism to her writings on critical thinking. Chapman takes as her central theme Stebbing's concern to apply the knowledge and skills she acquired in becoming one of the leading proponents of the new logic to the analysis of everyday thinking. Far from just being an advocate of analytic philosophy, in Stebbing's work we also find anticipations of some of the ideas and approaches in the later fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis. Although Stebbing had been more influenced

by G.E. Moore than by Russell, her activities in adult education and her emergence – however reluctant – as a public intellectual suggest a philosopher closer in spirit to Russell than to Moore. What comes out most in Chapman's account is Stebbing's extraordinary intellectual and personal integrity, exhibited in both her writing and her life. Chapman's lucid and engaging book will do a great deal to restore Stebbing's reputation among contemporary philosophers, but I hope it will also encourage further attention to the work of one of the most influential and linguistically acute philosophers working in the period between the two world wars.

Michael Beaney
October 2013

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Abbreviations of Principal Works by Stebbing

PFV *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* (1914) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MIL *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930) London: Methuen (2nd revised edition 1933).

LP *Logic in Practice* (1934) London: Methuen.

PP *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) London: Methuen.

TSP *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939) Harmondsworth: Penguin.

II *Ideals and Illusions* (1941) London: Watts and Co.

MEL *A Modern Elementary Logic* (1943) London: Methuen.

Contents

Introduction

During the 1930s and 40s, there was no shortage of writers ready to comment on language. These writers varied widely in their focus and motivation, and, as seems so often to be the case with such commentaries, their reasons for writing specifically about language often reflected preoccupations with much more general features of contemporary society and social change. Again, as often seems to be the case, much of the amateur commentary on language was straightforwardly prescriptivist; A. P. Herbert commented in 1935, with some approval, that: 'We poor professional writers receive by every other post advice and criticism from strangers, not only about what we say but about our manner of saying it – hyphens, split infinitives, relative clauses, 'if and when', etc'.[1] It was not just professional writers who were beset by advice on language use. The Society for Pure English, founded in 1913 at the instigation of the poet Robert Bridges, was still publishing regular tracts in reaction to what it saw as the declining standards in the use of the language. In some cases, the concern for 'getting things right' linguistically was linked to social anxiety and aspiration. This is reflected for instance in the attitudes to language varieties and their users voiced by characters in the contemporary novels of Nancy Mitford, and eventually presented, lightheartedly, in her *Noblesse Oblige*.[2]

There were more serious and didactic commentaries on language too, such as R. W. Jepson's *Clear Thinking* and Robert Thouless's *Straight and Crooked Thinking*, both of which included sections on the importance of close attention to language.[3] Some commentaries were politically motivated. Women writers were questioning not just what was explicitly said about women and their appropriate roles, but the very language used to describe them. Dorothy L. Sayers, for instance, drew attention to the implications of describing women as 'the opposite sex',

and asked why there were no books with titles such as 'The History of the Male' or newspaper headlines along the lines of 'Men-Artists of the Academy'.[4] The more general political upheaval of the time increased sensitivity to linguistic choices too. Virginia Woolf discussed the way in which words such as 'freedom' were used unquestioningly to signify both an ill-defined necessary good and a cause to fight for.[5] Perhaps most famously of all George Orwell dedicated his essay 'Politics and the English Language' to a discussion of the importance of clear and precise linguistic practice and the political and social dangers of carelessly or deliberately misleading forms of expression.[6]

In the midst of this flurry of writing about language, in 1939, the recently established Penguin Books published *Thinking to Some Purpose* by L. Susan Stebbing, in the striking light blue paper covers that identified their Pelican imprint titles of 'original non-fiction books on contemporary issues'.[7] The cover blurb enthusiastically explained that the book's purpose was 'practical', namely to draw attention to the ways in which thinking can fail in its purpose 'because we are untrained in the estimation of evidence, in the detection of prejudices, in the recognition of distorting effects of language used uncritically'. Writing about language use and its potential dangers was not a novel thing for an intellectual of the day to be doing, but Stebbing brought something new to the topic. By the time she published *TSP,* she was well established in academic circles as a leading advocate of the overhaul of formal symbolic logic that characterised contemporary British analytic philosophy. She saw nothing incongruous in applying her knowledge of this most abstract of philosophical systems to the problems of everyday life and to the practical analysis of the texts in which those problems were established and discussed. At the same time she paid close attention to how language is ordinarily used in human interaction. And she went further than acknowledging that everyday may differ from formal usage or commenting on how we might typically expect to find particular words used. She illustrated her argument with a series of compelling analyses of contemporary real-life texts: extracts taken from sources such as newspaper editorials, political speeches and advertising hoardings.

This book tells the story of the development of Stebbing's ideas throughout her career and the factors that equipped her for her pioneering approach to the discussion of language and its use, exemplified particularly in *TSP* but apparent in much of the work of her later years. It is a book about language to the extent that, although the diversity of Stebbing's interests makes it difficult to identify a single

topic in her thinking, the appeal to the specifics of linguistic usage was an increasingly strong force in her work. Stebbing wrote little explicitly on language as a topic in its own right; she was not described by her contemporaries as a philosopher of language. But it was when she was paying close attention to the ways in which language is used, or when she was critiquing the use of language by others, that her work was most original and most prescient. Even the work in which she presented recent developments in logical theory, such as her highly acclaimed 1930 textbook *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, was marked by the then unorthodox use of everyday examples and appeals to ordinary usage. Stebbing was by no means committed to the exclusive value of ordinary or common sense language. On the contrary, she was explicit about the importance of delimiting the uses to which everyday language was appropriate and those in which only technical philosophical, logical or scientific language would do. Nevertheless, she became increasingly committed to what could be described as 'the language of common sense' in two ways. She appealed to her readers' everyday, rather than technical or esoteric, experience of language use. She also took issue with fellow philosophers, with popularising scientists, with advertisers and with politicians when they used language in ways that were calculated to impress, to persuade or to manipulate but that clear-sighted analysis could show to go against the evidence of common sense. In this, again, her background in formal logic was to the fore. As the blurb of *TSP* acknowledges, Stebbing was anxious 'to correct the common mistake of assuming an essential conflict between "logic" and "common sense"'. However, this book is not just about language; the work in which Stebbing appealed in various ways to the language of common sense will be considered in the context of her output as a whole and the place of this in its philosophical milieu.

Stebbing is more than an interesting figure from twentieth-century philosophy, worth reclaiming from the relative obscurity into which she has fallen in recent decades. A reading of her work as a whole offers a fresh insight into the relationship between the philosophy of language, particularly in its most formal and logical manifestations, and the study of language as a medium of everyday human interaction. In this the two most striking aspects of Stebbing's approach to language identified above are jointly significant: her background in formal logic and her engagement with everyday language and even the everyday texts produced in her contemporary society. The developments in logical analysis of which she was a leading exponent were part of the formal style of analytic philosophy which is sometimes described as 'ideal

language philosophy' and linked to disdain for everyday language in relation to philosophical discussion. As such it is often contrasted to the 'ordinary language philosophy' movement that began to take root in Oxford in the years leading up to the Second World War and that looked to the language that people use in their everyday transactions for both the primary data and the guiding methodology of philosophical discussion. Yet Stebbing was also strongly influenced by Moore, with his insistence on consulting common sense and the resources of everyday language, and in her own writings she consistently drew on examples of language in use. Her work as a whole challenges the necessity of a sharp division between analytic approaches to language by incorporating and successfully accommodating elements of both 'ideal' and 'ordinary' language. It suggests an earlier start and a greater continuity throughout analytic philosophy than has previously been envisaged for the serious scrutiny of everyday linguistic usage.

Stebbing's work can contribute to discussions of language in the more recent academic discipline of linguistics, too. It offers independent support to the conviction that the serious study of language necessarily involves attention to how it is used. This conviction underlies all the branches of linguistics that take account of the producers, receivers and contexts of language use: branches that include sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and also pragmatics. Pragmatics acknowledges a more immediate debt to the philosophers of ordinary language, but unlike them, Stebbing incorporated the analysis of extracts of actual spoken and written texts into her philosophical work. For this reason also, Stebbing's approach prefigures the development of branches of linguistics concerned with the relationship of language use to social, political and ideological motivations, some half a century later: branches such as critical discourse analysis.

This book also tells the story of Stebbing's life, because her historical circumstances and personal attitudes inevitably shaped her philosophical work. Stebbing's biography itself is relatively uneventful, comprising a Victorian childhood, an education at the Universities of Cambridge and London and a conventionally successful academic career. But her story takes on greater significance when viewed in its historical context, philosophically, politically and socially. In terms of her philosophical context, her career brought her into contact with many of the leading Western philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century, and many who were responsible for shaping the course of analytic philosophy. These included those of her seniors who had an early personal influence on her such as Bertrand Russell, A. N. Whitehead and,

especially, G. E. Moore, but also contemporary or younger philosophers with whom she worked, agreed or disagreed; the list includes Rudolf Carnap, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Moritz Schlick, Karl Popper, John Wisdom, C. E. M. Joad, Max Black, Gilbert Ryle and A. J. Ayer. As the list suggests, she engaged with philosophers working in continental Europe as well as those working in Britain, at a time when these geographically separate traditions in analytic philosophy were seen by many as being at odds or even incompatible with each other. She actively promoted discussion between the two sides, introducing the ideas of logical positivism to the British philosophical establishment some years before Ayer's more flamboyant and public account of it in *Language Truth and Logic*. In political terms, Stebbing's life spanned a particularly turbulent time; having lived through the First World War she experienced the upheavals and uncertainties of the 1920s and 30s, and the various crises that led to the Second World War, although she did not live to see its conclusion. Her life is also significant when viewed in its social context. She succeeded in her academic career at a time when there were very few female professional philosophers, and high academic achievement for women was hampered both by lack of opportunities and by social attitudes. When she attended Cambridge, the University did not award degrees to women, and in fact, it was not to do so in her lifetime. Throughout her career, the relationship between women and university education and appointments was a matter of controversy; Stebbing herself caused something of a stir in 1933 by becoming the first woman to hold a chair in Philosophy at a British university.

This remains a significant factor in reconsidering her importance today, against the background of what Mary Ellen Waithe has described as the 'myth ... that philosophy is the stuff of only the greatest male intellects',[8] and the emphasis of feminist historians of philosophy such as Charlotte Witt on 'retrieving women philosophers' from obscurity: on demonstrating that the contribution of women to philosophy has been more extensive than the traditionally constructed canon allows.[9] Stebbing was never keen that attention should be drawn to her status as a 'woman philosopher'; she preferred, for instance, to be referred to by 'the bare surname without academic title or sex denomination'.[10] But she was harsh in her criticism of anything that she saw as unthinking prejudice, including prejudice on the basis of sex; her chief concern was to take her part in mainstream philosophical discussion as an unquestioned equal to her male contemporaries. She did not write about the type of philosophical topics typically associated with women, concentrating on rational thought, and more specifically on

logic, subjects that some have seen as anathema to women's way of thinking.[11] Some pragmatists have suggested that women philosophers should embrace pragmatism because of the scope it affords to different viewpoints and experiences.[12] Yet Stebbing rejected pragmatism. It is tempting to say that Stebbing would have applauded Else Barth's assessment that 'women's work, and women's voices, are not to be tucked away in separate corners of the academic world. They are to be put where they belong, right in the heart of each academic field and (sub)discipline',[13] and perhaps even more strongly Mary Warnock's argument that 'the truths which philosophers seek must aim to be not merely generally, but objectively, even universally, true. Essentially they must be gender-indifferent'.[14]

The usual biographer's caution about what the subject 'would have' said or thought on any issue must be heightened in Stebbing's case because her personality is elusive. This seems to have been a quite deliberate effect. As she admitted towards the end of her life, she disliked and avoided 'the personal mode of writing'.[15] It is true that as her career progressed her writing became somewhat more marked by her personal opinions and attitudes and, indeed, by a dry and restrained humour. But as a rule her writing reflects what those who knew her recall about her; she was a self-effacing and an extremely private person, who wanted her work to be read but had no wish personally to be the centre of attention.[16] Her friend Ursula Roberts, a published poet and novelist under the pseudonym Susan Miles, jotted down this stern implied injunction: 'L. S. S. became one of my most intimate and beloved friends; I had masses of letters from her, but I have destroyed them. She would have hated them to have been read – or her biography to have been written'.[17]

The letters from Stebbing that do survive, to Roberts and to a number of other friends, shed significant light not just on Stebbing as a person but on her attitude to the philosophy and philosophers of her day and to her own work. Her professional and philosophical responsibilities were in her thoughts constantly, and she wrote about her plans for her work, its progress and, frequently, her dissatisfaction with its quality, even to nonphilosophical friends. Philosophical discussion, whether in solitary composition or in collaborative conversation, was her chief delight. Allegedly, she once told an unnamed 'friend' that 'her ideal ... was to live in an ivory tower, to think and write philosophy only'.[18] Certainly, she reveled in the freedom to pursue philosophical inquiry for its own sake. Commenting on the activities of a group of Harvard philosophy graduates who 'met once a week to "follow