

# Susan Stebbing: The Other Cambridge Common Sense Philosopher

Draft of June 20, 2021

This trick of making *tables* disappear is responsible for the uneasy question: “But aren’t there *really* tables?” Several of us have discussed this question *ad nauseam*, and I believe we are all agreed that there really are tables. . . . I think, indeed, that by now we ought to have given up the foolish habit of trying to reduce the number of objects in the world.

Susan Stebbing (1938/39: 75)

Early twentieth century Cambridge was home to two philosophers of common sense: G.E. Moore (1873–1958) and Susan Stebbing (1885–1943). It was the former, however, whose name would become synonymous with the label (in the analytic tradition at least) and who would eventually be recognized as one of the great founders of analytic philosophy.

*Why* that is, is an interesting historical and sociological question. For it’s doubtful that it was Stebbing’s lack of accolades and accomplishments that precluded her from being similarly canonized.<sup>1</sup> Nor could it have been

<sup>1</sup> Besides the essential role she played in bringing Logical Positivism to Cambridge, Stebbing served as president of both the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association, co-founded the journal *Analysis*, and was first to publish an analytic philosophy textbook, among other things. She was also a great popularizer of philosophy and logic (see her *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939)) and resisted the temptation of her time to reduce philosophical problems to language. Moreover, she saw the influence and importance philosophical thinking could have on public and political discourse, as well as how it could fearlessly

because common sense was somehow less central to her philosophy than it was to Moore's. So why is it that the analytic tradition seems to have left Britain's first female Professor of Philosophy behind?<sup>2</sup>

One potential answer comes from A.J. Ayer who once described Stebbing as "very much a disciple of Moore" (1977: 157–158). Ayer's remark is a telling one; both because it betrays his ignorance of Stebbing's body of work and for what it suggests about the climate in philosophy at that time for women.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, Stebbing was just *too* similar to Moore to distinguish herself. Or so Ayer's description implies.

And yet, while most commentators disagree with Ayer's description, none have really offered an account of *why* and *how* Stebbing was much more than the philosopher of Ayer's caricature.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while ink has been spilled over Stebbing's contributions to logic and analysis, little has been said about her relationship to common sense and her common sense approach

keep in check the amateur philosophizing the scientists of her day were all too prone to lapse into (see especially her *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937)). See Beaney (2003) and Chapman (2013: 87–88) for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Historical injustices aside, Stebbing scholarship is quickly growing, largely spurred on by the trailblazing efforts of Michael Beaney (2000, 2003, 2017) and Siobhan Chapman (2013) and the increasing interest in marginalized figures within the history of analytic philosophy. See Willow (1995), Milkov (2003), Beaney and Chapman (2017), Janssen-Lauret (forthcoming, 2017), Kouri Kissel (2019), and Coliva (forthcoming). Beaney (2017) also appears to be rectifying the situation. In his recent monograph *Analytic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* he lists Stebbing as one of the five founders of the analytic tradition (alongside Frege, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein) and devotes an entire chapter to her work.

<sup>3</sup> With G.E. Moore retiring, Stebbing was thought to be a worthy replacement, except (perhaps unsurprisingly) 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!)" (Letter to Edna Purdie and Lillian Penson, 25 January 1939, RHC PP5/1/11 Archives, RHUL). See Chapman (2013: 126) for a more comprehensive account of this event.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Beaney and Chapman (2018: §§3–4).

to philosophy and to metaphysics in particular.<sup>5</sup> My aims in this paper are to shed some light on these neglected elements of Stebbing's philosophy and show how Stebbing's body of work reveals a philosopher that was in many ways more commonsensical than Moore.

Two questions in particular will guide my discussion. The first concerns the role common sense plays in Stebbing's metaphysics. The second concerns how much of Stebbing's common sense worldview was influenced by Moore. Against Frederique Janssen-Lauret's (forthcoming) recent interpretation, I'll argue the Stebbing's acknowledgment of Moore's influence was more than just an acknowledgement of "courtesy." In this respect, Moore's influence on Stebbing shouldn't be understated. But it shouldn't be overstated either. Calling her a Moorean—or a "disciple of Moore"—is far too reductive. As I'll argue, Stebbing is better thought of as a common sense realist of sorts.

## 1. Against Deductive Metaphysics

Stebbing's relationship to metaphysics was subtle and complicated. She was opposed to the idealist metaphysics that had come to dominate nineteenth century Britain (and that would soon meet its fate at the hands of her contemporaries G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in the early twentieth century). And yet, perhaps *unlike* many of her contemporaries,<sup>6</sup> Stebbing seemed to have found a place for metaphysics and metaphysical analysis in the philosophy of her day—a realist metaphysics that was grounded first and foremost in common sense. But Stebbing's enthusiasm for this "new" metaphysics

<sup>5</sup> See Beaney (2000, 2003, 2017), Beaney and Chapman (2017), and Janssen-Lauret (2017). The exceptions are only recent and include Coliva (forthcoming) and Janssen-Lauret (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Stebbing's appreciation and tolerance of metaphysics certainly distinguished her from her (analytic) continental contemporaries in Austria and Germany. When compared to her British contemporaries, however, who were generally less hostile toward metaphysics, her interests in (and defense of) metaphysics aren't as unusual. It's fair to say, however, that compared to her colleagues, Stebbing did a lot more to defend the importance and place of metaphysics and metaphysical analysis in philosophy.

wasn't unwavering; her skepticism and doubt about metaphysical analysis would be a common theme throughout her work as her uneasiness with its core assumptions would remain largely unresolved.<sup>7</sup>

To get a better handle on what Stebbing's relationship to metaphysics was—and to ultimately better our understanding of her relationship to metaphysical analysis (§§2.3) and common sense (§3, §4)—it will be helpful to start with what approach to metaphysics Stebbing was against, namely, *deductive metaphysics*, as embodied by the works of British idealists like F.H. Bradley and J.M.E. McTaggart, the latter of which Stebbing once called “the greatest deductive [philosopher] since Spinoza” (1932/33: 66).<sup>8</sup>

Like Moore and Russell, Stebbing was highly critical of deductive metaphysics, and in general (perhaps characteristic of her time), suspicious of any grand, systematic conception of philosophy. In multiple places, she speaks disparagingly of those philosophers and physicists who concern themselves with a *Weltbild* or “world-picture” (1933: 26). Indeed, her contempt for the approach reaches its peak when comparing the works of the deductive metaphysician to works of art:

They—or some of them [=deductive metaphysical systems]—are great as works of art are great. Hence their spiritual significance. They heighten the joy of living but they do not give knowledge; they are the source of inspiration, but they do not yield understanding (1932/33: 94).

Such a system [=deductive metaphysical system] may have beauty, the beauty of a work of art. Small wonder that great men have

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Stebbing seems noticeably less interested in metaphysical analysis as she progresses through her career, ultimately stressing the importance of logical analysis over metaphysical analysis. (See §§2.3 for discussion of this distinction.)

<sup>8</sup> It was actually upon reading the work of F.H. Bradley that Stebbing decided to switch concentrations in college. Stebbing started off studying History at Cambridge's Girton College (one of two institutions that women could study at during that time) but in 1907, after having discovered Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* in the library, she decided to switch to Philosophy.

spent themselves in the creation of such constructions. In my opinion, metaphysics does not consist in creation but in investigation (1932/33: 68).

The criticisms here are quite severe—not many philosophers would appreciate their work being compared to art in this clearly demeaning way<sup>9</sup>—but their brusqueness isn’t entirely unusual for philosophy at that time. (Although, make no mistake: Stebbing was just as fierce, if not more, in criticizing her opponents’ views as she was in criticizing her own.)<sup>10</sup>

But just what exactly lies at the heart of the deductive approach that leads Stebbing to such criticism? The last line in the quote above—“metaphysics does not consist in creation but in investigation”—offers a vague hint, but to appreciate it much more needs to be said about the deductive conception of metaphysics, at least as Stebbing understands it.

According to Stebbing, the deductive conception is committed to the following three ideas concerning the aim and scope of metaphysics (1932/33: 66):

- Metaphysics is concerned with Reality.
- Reality has an ultimate nature (which is distinct from its apparent nature).
- Metaphysics provides us with knowledge of this ultimate Reality.

(I follow Stebbing here in capitalizing the “R” in “Reality” which is intended to capture “ultimate reality,” that is, the reality distinct from manifest reality or the reality of appearances, i.e., common sense reality.)

Deductive metaphysics, then, is concerned with this: *ultimate* reality. Of course, this presupposes that reality *has* an ultimate nature (the second item above) and therefore that a successful deductive metaphysics would, in theory, provide us with *knowledge* of such reality (the third item above).

<sup>9</sup> See McSweeney (forthcoming) for a more positive analogy between metaphysics and art.

<sup>10</sup> Many of Stebbing’s papers begin with exercises in self-flagellation; with strange zeal, she condemns her previous ideas as hopeless and muddled. See Chapman (2013: 87) who also picks up on this idiosyncrasy.

More pressing here, however, is the first item: Metaphysics is concerned with *Reality*. For as Stebbing observes, this idea presupposes that there is a particular realm of facts (facts unlike those uncovered by other knowledge-seeking disciplines like history or biology) that provide metaphysics with its own *distinctive* subject matter. For what distinguishes the facts uncovered by the deductive metaphysician from other facts is primarily their *ultimacy*. And this ultimacy—and the attempt to derive the apparent *from* this ultimacy—is what, according to Stebbing, makes the method of metaphysics deductive:

Only a very muddled chemist could suppose that hydrogen is more ultimate than water in any sense other than “chemically more simple.” The case is quite otherwise, however, with the opposition of the ultimate nature of reality to its apparent nature. This distinction is not yielded by experimental observation; it is not *yielded* at all. On the contrary, the philosopher who accepts the distinction *starts* from the ultimate and attempts to derive the apparent from the characteristics of the ultimate. The method of the derivation is deductive; it could be no other (1932/33: 67).

It’s this ultimacy, however, that also makes the method of metaphysics dubious—at least to Stebbing’s mind. Though Stebbing isn’t always explicit about this, the core of her contentions with the deductive approach seem to stem from a disagreement over philosophical starting points. To put things in slightly more contemporary terms, we might say that the method of deductive metaphysics is broadly *methodist* in spirit.<sup>11</sup> The deductive metaphysician starts with some general principles about the ultimate nature of reality (typically developed in response to questions of the form “What is it to be an *F*?”) and then attempts to systematically recover (i.e., *deduce*) the appearances from these principles. If the metaphysician’s principles about reality’s ultimacy don’t square with the appearances, then so much the worse for the appearances.

Understanding the dispute in these terms, as one about philosophical starting points, coheres well with how Stebbing seems to be contextualiz-

<sup>11</sup> See Chisholm (1973).

ing the dispute herself. For she says that the very possibility of deductive metaphysics, “issues naturally from a very common view of the nature of philosophy” (1932/33: 68). That very common view of philosophy might be characterized as being broadly Cartesian in nature: philosophy involves the finding of reasons or justification for our many pre-philosophical common sense beliefs about the world; where justification is wanting, or absent in its entirety, philosophical inquiry urges us to find better—or more epistemically resilient—foundations for those beliefs; if they can’t be found, we must abandon those beliefs, however commonsensical, on pain of dogmatism:

This view entails that the proper method of metaphysics is deductive. The metaphysician having found these ‘reasons’ must exhibit them *as reasons*; he must show that the justification of our beliefs follows from them. Thus arises a deductive metaphysical construction (1932/33: 68).

The deductive metaphysician, then, seeks to construct a metaphysical system whose foundation rests upon some set of a priori philosophical principles intended to provide the rational ground for our commonsensical beliefs. These principles are fundamental in the sense that everything in one’s metaphysical system can be deduced from them. Moreover, in keeping with this broadly Cartesian picture, it’s these fundamental philosophical principles, not the conclusions drawn from them, that command the utmost certainty; indeed, they are thought by the deductive metaphysician to have a certain sort of Cartesian “indubitability”:

No conclusion drawn within the system can be more certain than any of the premises upon which the conclusion is based. The conclusion cannot have a greater guarantee of truth than the premisses. Whatever precisely may be meant by “guarantee of truth,” there can be no doubt that it must be so interpreted that the metaphysician who is constructing the system believes that only in the fundamental premisses is the guarantee of truth to be found. From this point of view metaphysicians are apt to seek for an indubitable datum (1932/33: 69).

The deductive metaphysician therefore abandons common sense in at least two ways. First, by thinking that there is something more epistemically fundamental, and hence more certain, than our ordinary common sense truisms such as *here is a hand*; and second, by rejecting said truisms if the search for such fundamental principles comes up short. But one might think that untethering philosophical inquiry from common sense in this way leads to a certain kind of philosophical free-fall: without common sense as an anchor, too much is left up to the imagination and intuitions of the speculative philosopher. Hence why, to echo Stebbing's earlier analogy, the deductive metaphysician is prone to the creative impulses of the artist, rather than the investigative impulses of the theoretician. And hence why, in Stebbing's opinion, deductive metaphysics consists (mistakenly) in "creation," not "investigation."

The mistake the deductive metaphysician makes, then, is ultimately methodological. The deductive metaphysician begins philosophical inquiry in abstraction, with a priori fundamental principles about the ultimate nature of reality, instead of with concrete instances of common sense.

## 2. No New Facts

Stebbing's critique of deductive metaphysics makes it easy to interpret her as being *anti*-metaphysics. She isn't. Indeed, her interest in metaphysics, and the substantive role she sees it playing in philosophical analysis, is in many ways what distinguished her from her more positivistically-inclined peers and colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

Stebbing's preferred approach to metaphysics is one that begins with common sense. This puts her methodology squarely at odds with the methodism of the deductive conception. Hers, by comparison, is broadly *particularist*. Roughly: philosophy begins with specific instances of knowledge and works backwards to determine what makes such knowledge so and, crucially, *what makes our common sense beliefs true*. While the deductive metaphysi-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. footnote 6.

cian privileges abstract, metaphysical principles as the rational basis of our common sense knowledge, Stebbing doesn't share their confidence in such principles. Instead, since it's much more certain that our ordinary, common sense beliefs are true over any abstract a priori metaphysical principles, we must *start* with common sense which "needs no defence" (1938–39: 84):

I hold that such a belief, as, for example, that there is a table in this room, or that I am now sitting at this table, or that putting my hand in the flame was unpleasant, must afford a starting point. We cannot demonstrate that *this* given belief is true; we cannot find premisses more certain than the belief itself *from which* it may be *deduced* (1932/33: 70).

We must begin with commonsense facts, such as *I see this candle*, or *This blow on his head killed this man*, or *Her remarks made him angry*. It is useless first to *define* "material thing," or "cause," and then to ask whether the terms so defined are exemplified in the world. Yet this is what the deductive metaphysician does, unless he takes the easier course of defining the terms, and then ruling out whatever does not conform to the definition as 'mere appearance' (1932/33: 74).

In granting common sense such a central role in her philosophical theorizing, Moore's influence on Stebbing's thought is brought to the fore. Here, however, we need to be careful not to *overestimate* his influence on her. A question that will become relevant is this: How much of a Moorean was Stebbing really? I'll attempt to answer that question in the next section (§3). Before that, it's crucial we get the rest of Stebbing's preferred approach to metaphysics on the table.

### 2.1 "Making precise the reference of all true beliefs"

Metaphysics for Stebbing, then, begins with what is known: with common sense truisms like *here is a hand* or *there is a table in this room*. Stebbing seems to think that this implies that metaphysics is neither "concerned with a distinctive region of fact" nor is its method deductive inference, hence

“metaphysics does not aim at demonstration” (1932/33: 66). So, *pace* the deductive conception, Stebbingsonian metaphysics isn’t defined by its own distinct subject matter; metaphysics isn’t in the business of discovering “new facts,” nor does the metaphysician aim at the production of absolute and certain necessary truths:

In a sense, the metaphysician is not concerned to discover any *new facts*; he does not add to the sum-total of human knowledge in the way in which the natural scientist or the historian does (1932/33: 65).

If metaphysics isn’t in the business of discovering any new facts or producing any necessary truths, what exactly *is* it in the business of? Answer: metaphysics can *analyze* common sense facts. Metaphysics, according to Stebbing, aims to “show what is the structure of the facts in the world to which reference is made....” (1932/33: 65). She elaborates:

In so far as the aim of metaphysics were achieved, it would enable us to know what precisely there is in the world. To know what precisely there is in the world is to know what are the facts which together make up, i.e., constitute, the world. To know precisely what a given fact is is to know both the elements that make up the fact and the mode of their combination. In other words, it is to know the structure of the fact. Hence, the aim of metaphysics is to reveal the structure of that fact to which reference is made in true statements (1932/33: 65).

Notice that Stebbing talks of facts, not propositions. Recall that if metaphysics aims at the production of *knowledge*, then it must be dealing in facts and not propositions which might be false. Moreover, she seems to think of facts along the lines of obtaining states of affairs. Echoing Russell and Wittgenstein, she says that to know what there is “is to know what are the facts which together *make up*, i.e., *constitute*, the world” (emphasis added) and that to know what a fact is “is to know both the *elements* that make up the fact and the *mode of their combination*” (emphasis added). Facts, then, are the sorts of things that contain “elements,” i.e., objects, properties, and

relations.<sup>13</sup> To contemporary ears, Stebbing's characterization of metaphysics will sound familiar. In a slogan: metaphysics aims at uncovering the structure of reality.<sup>14</sup>

A slightly more interesting gloss, however, comes from Stebbing a few pages later:

[T]he business of metaphysics is to show (i) what exactly we are believing when we believe that there is a table in this room, that it was here three hours ago, and so on; (ii) *how* our various beliefs are inter-related; (iii) how our inconsistent beliefs may be adjusted, and which should be rejected. Thus metaphysics aims at making precise the reference of all true beliefs. For this purpose [metaphysical] analysis is indispensable (1932/33: 70).

What's intriguing about Stebbing's second characterization is its epistemological overtones (notice that her first characterization is much more metaphysical). Indeed, it's hard not to read conditions (ii) and (iii) above as falling under the scope of epistemology rather than metaphysics proper. Trying to determine how all of our *beliefs* are interrelated and how, in particular, we might *adjust* our *beliefs* in the face of inconsistency (i.e., belief revision) sounds a lot like a job for the epistemologist rather than the metaphysician (although of course there is important, if not controversial, overlap here). Perhaps this curiosity only speaks to how specialized philosophy has become today. Or perhaps Stebbing was of the opinion that disentangling metaphysics from epistemology (and vice versa) isn't so easily done and that both must be carried out in tandem with one another. In fact, this last point probably isn't so far-off. For Stebbing worried quite a bit about how the presuppositions of metaphysical analysis could ultimately be justified.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A common way to think about states of affairs is to treat them as object-property/relation pairs; states of affairs obtain just in case some object in the world has some property or stands in some relation to some other object.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sider (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Analysis must come to end at some point, and when it does, there is a bottom—a set of

## 2.2 “Discovering *what it is precisely which we already in some sense knew*”

Now, Stebbing says that the aim of metaphysics is to know which facts constitute the world, which is to say “to know both the elements that make up the fact[s] and the mode of their combination” (1932/33: 65). But how should we understand this knowledge of the elements and their mode of combination? What *epistemic* sense can we make of Stebbing’s metaphysics?

We know that Stebbing is opposed to deductive metaphysics. We also know that, as Stebbing herself points out in a footnote, the principles of deductive metaphysics assume the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge and that this is partially why Stebbing opposes the deductive approach.<sup>16</sup> So metaphysics doesn’t seem to be synthetic a priori for Stebbing. Might it be analytic? This remark of Stebbing’s suggests that *something* like this might be the case:

But in using the method of metaphysical analysis we are not using a method of *discovering* reasons; we are using a method of discovering *what it is precisely* which we already in some sense knew (1932/33: 93).

This leaves us with a puzzle of sorts: what exactly does metaphysical knowledge culminate in for Stebbing?

A full answer to that question certainly can’t be taken up here, but what might be said, in a speculative spirit, is this. Stebbing’s conception of metaphysics seems to be a broadly naturalistic one: metaphysics is in some way continuous with the sciences (a thesis that Quine would advance not too

basic facts—at which it terminates (cf. Russell (1922) and Wittgenstein (1921)). But is this presupposition of metaphysical analysis justified? Why assume there is any bottom at all? Stebbing reaches a negative verdict. Metaphysical analysis terminates in *basic facts* but this presupposition isn’t justified: it’s eminently possible that *there are no basic facts at all*. Yet, in order for the project of metaphysical analysis to be carried out it has to be assumed that there *are* such facts. But it doesn’t appear that the metaphysician has legitimate grounds for thinking that such an assumption is true. At least so argues Stebbing (1932/33).

<sup>16</sup> See Stebbing (1932/33: 68, fn.†).

long after her). Indeed, although Stebbing doesn't seem prepared to say that metaphysics is empirical, she seems to think that it at least *begins* with the empirical insofar as it begins with common sense propositions like *here is a hand* or *there is a table in this room*. Such propositions are clearly contingent, empirical ones, thus insofar as metaphysics begins with common sense, it begins with the empirical.

Stebbing's remarks above about discovering what "we already in some sense knew" can now be better understood. The method of metaphysics involves uncovering the *structure* of common sense facts like *here is a hand* or *there is a table in this room* ("...the structure of that fact to which reference is made in true statements" (1932: 65)). But we may just as well have described these common sense facts as *things that are known* (and known on the basis of experience, say). In other words: that which "we already in some sense knew." The method of metaphysics therefore takes what is known and adds understanding: it reveals to us what *makes true* that which is already known.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3 *Metaphysical Analysis*

A crucial element of Stebbing's approach to metaphysics has only so far been mentioned in passing but not unpacked: the method of *metaphysical analysis*. One of Stebbing's major philosophical contributions came in the form of distinguishing, and decoupling, this sort of analysis from *logical analysis*.<sup>18</sup> Stebbing not only sought to register a distinction between these two different forms of analysis but to show that this was indeed a distinction

<sup>17</sup> Still, even if all that metaphysics uncovers is the structure of facts, how should we understand our knowledge of such structure and our knowledge of the relations obtaining between such facts without invoking analyticity or the synthetic a priori? These are tough questions for any philosopher. Nevertheless, it's not entirely clear what Stebbing's views are on the matter.

<sup>18</sup> The former came to be loosely associated with the Vienna school and accordingly came to be known as the "Vienna school of analysis," whereas the latter became closely associated with the Cambridge school and hence came to be known as the "Cambridge school of analysis."

*with* a difference. For not everyone was convinced that it was.<sup>19</sup> So, what does the difference come down to and how did Stebbing conceive of that difference?

Start with logical analysis which Stebbing identifies with “same level” analysis:

Grammatical analysis [=logical analysis] is analysis at what might be called *the same level*...Grammatical analysis remains at the same level because it is concerned *only* with the sentence, i.e., with words combined to express a complex meaning (1932/33: 77–78).

Talk of “levels” is, of course, metaphorical. But it’s a useful metaphor. For it’s precisely this difference in “level” that distinguishes logical analysis from metaphysical analysis which Stebbing says is *directional*:

The aim of metaphysical analysis is to determine the elements and the mode of combination of those elements to which reference is made when any given true assertion is made (1932/33: 79).

I suggested that such analysis should be called directional in the precise sense that at each step the analysis proceeded in a determined direction, namely, in the direction of increasing simplicity, until at the last step there was a resultant which was logically incapable of further analysis (1938/39: 73).

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.<sup>20</sup> It’s this difference in aim and purpose that Stebbing sees

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many of her contemporaries failed to heed the distinction. See especially Black (1933).

<sup>20</sup> The difference can be captured in a slightly more formal way: the relation involved in logical analysis is a symmetrical relation whereas the relation involved in metaphysical analysis is an asymmetrical one.

the Logical Positivists (of both the Vienna and Berlin schools) as failing to appreciate and understand. Hence, Stebbing views their treatment of analysis as incomplete (1933/33: 82–83).<sup>21</sup>

The nature of logical analysis is thought to be best captured by Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions which represented the paradigm of analysis in the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> Statements like "The present King of France is bald" seem false namely because, at present, France isn't a monarchy and hence has no king (or queen) for the property *is bald* to be predicated of. But if this statement is false, then surely its negation "The present King of France is not bald" is true. This, however, seems false for the same reason the first sentence seems false: France has no king that is bald or not bald *because France has no king at all!* So we have a puzzle.

As is well-known, Russell's solution is to argue that there are two ways to analyze "The present King of France is not bald":

$$(1a) (\exists x)(Kx \& (\forall y)(Ky \supset y=x) \& \sim Bx)$$

There is one and only one King of France and whatever is King of France is **not** bald

$$(1b) \sim(\exists x)(Kx \& (\forall y)(Ky \supset y=x) \& Bx)$$

**It is not the case that** there is one and only one King of France and whatever is King of France is bald

(1a), or the *narrow-scope* reading (where "scope" refers to the scope of

<sup>21</sup> Part of the frustration Stebbing was experiencing with the Logical Positivists's failure to appreciate this distinction could partially be explained by the fact that Stebbing didn't think that all philosophical problems were linguistic. In fact, she thinks that philosophical problems (including metaphysical problems) arise out of our ordinary experiences and that the puzzles and problems that we encounter are because "the structure of ordinary language [is not] similar to the structure of the configurations of the world" (1932/33: 81). Stebbing maintains that there is a kind of asymmetry between ordinary language and this is in-part why she seems to think that logical analysis isn't enough: "...in my opinion more than translation is involved. We translate simply to see more clearly what is the immediate reference to the proposition" (1932/33: 81).

<sup>22</sup> See Beaney (2000, 2003).

negation), gets us into trouble since it presupposes dubious Meinongian non-existents. That is, (1a) says that there exists some non-existent  $x$  such that  $it_x$  has the property of being not bald. Russell argues that the analysis we should prefer is (1b), or the *wide-scope* reading, since all (1b) says is that there is nothing in the world that satisfies the description *the present King of France is bald*. For Russell and others, translation of a natural language expression into first-order logic was supposed to reveal, in a precise way, what we meant all along. In this respect, logical analysis was thought to help us think more clearly.

While Russell's example is typically meant to be an example of logical, same level analysis, it's not clear why it doesn't also count as metaphysical analysis. To be sure, the difference is likely one of degree rather than one of kind. Russell's preference for (1b) over (1a) is, after all, metaphysically motivated: (1a) commits us to a dubious ontology of non-existent things while (1b) doesn't.<sup>23</sup>

A better (or at least clearer) example of the distinction between logical and metaphysical analysis comes from Stebbing.<sup>24</sup> Consider the sentence:

(E) Every economist is fallible.

A logical analysis of (E) would yield the following (in Loglish):

(E\*) For every  $x$ , if  $x$  is an economist then  $x$  is fallible.

The formalism in (E\*) is supposed to reveal the underlying logical form of (E); (E\*) is supposed to be a precisification of (E). This is because the move from (E) to (E\*) is all done at the "same level." (E\*) is just a more perspicuous way of saying (E).

<sup>23</sup> See Stebbing (1932/33: 75–76) for discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Although note that a year later Stebbing says (surprisingly, confusingly) that she was "not giving a directional analysis of Every economist is fallible" (1934: 35). Nor, she claims, was she giving an analytic definition of it. Rather, the example was meant to clarify her distinction between *referring to* and *indicating*. Her example about the Committee (below) is, however, used explicitly by Stebbing to elucidate the idea of directional analysis.

Now, according to Stebbing, this is all very different from metaphysical analysis. One attempt at a metaphysical analysis of (E) might look something like the following:

(E<sup>#</sup>) Maynard Keynes is fallible, Josiah Stamp is fallible, ...

(E<sup>#</sup>) isn't just another way of saying (E) *per se*. This, however, may be hard to see at first. After all, when we assert (E) it seems that what we mean is something within the vicinity of (E<sup>#</sup>).

The difference, however, can be better appreciated by noticing that metaphysical analysis doesn't terminate at this level and that the "further down" our analysis goes the less plausible it is to say that our analysis captures what it is that we meant all along by our analysandum. For example, (E<sup>#</sup>) might be further metaphysically analyzed as:

(E<sup>##</sup>) The cells that compose Maynard Keynes are arranged in such a way such that *fallibility* can be attributed to them, the cells that compose Josiah Stamp are arranged in such a way such that *fallibility* can be attributed to them, ...

Yet, it's highly implausible to think that what we meant all along by (E) was (E<sup>##</sup>). This suggests that something else is at work in our analysis. (E<sup>##</sup>) isn't logical, but metaphysical.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Stebbing's remarks on the relationship between what she calls "immediate reference" and "ultimate reference" can help us get a better grip on the distinction. Stebbing says that when we analyze a proposition we aim to discover what exactly it asserts; that is, not what the proposition's "immediate referent" is, but rather what the proposition really refers to, or as Stebbing says, "what exactly it asserts" (1932/33: 78) or the "ultimate reference of what is expressed" (1932/33: 87). Call this a proposition's *ultimate referent*. A proposition's immediate and ultimate referent differ, then, in the following way. According to Stebbing, a proposition's immediate referent is something we are all familiar with and understand when we know a proposition. The immediate referent of there is a table in this room, for example, is that there is table in this room. To know what a proposition's ultimate referent is is "to know what must be the case if we are answering truly" (1932/33: 79). To know, then, that Maynard Keynes is fallible and that Josiah Stamp is fallible (and so on) is to know what must be the case if the proposition "Every economist is fallible" is

Accordingly, we can think of (E<sup>#</sup>) and (E<sup>##</sup>) as operating at different levels of analysis, each level further revealing what in the world makes the antecedent facts true. Stebbing makes this all the more vivid, using a committee as an example:

If we analyse a statement about a Committee into a statement about individuals, then the analysis is directional, and the levels are different. If we again analyse the statement about individuals into statements about bodily and mental states, then the analysis is directional. The direction is *fixed*, in the sense that the direction is *from* statements about the committee *through* statements about individuals *to* statements about bodily and mental states. The direction is sometimes said to be from the less to the more ultimate (1934: 35–6).

Metaphysical analysis is different from logical analysis, then, in that, roughly speaking, the latter is used to get clearer on what it is we're trying to say, while the former is used to discern what it is that *makes* our beliefs *true*, i.e., “what exactly we are believing when we believe that there is a table in this room” (1932/33: 70).<sup>26</sup>

true. But we needn't know this to know the immediate referent of “Every economist is fallible”; for its immediate referent is just that: if something is an economist, then it is fallible.

<sup>26</sup> Apparently, it was never Stebbing's intention to defend the method of metaphysical analysis in the first place. Six years after the publication of “The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics” (MAM), in “Some Puzzles about Analysis” (SPA), Stebbing surprises us with this:

I tried to show [in MAM] that this metaphysical use of the method of analysis rested upon certain assumptions which, so far as I knew, had not been explicitly stated....I tried further to show that, once the assumptions 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 ...The fault is mine. (1938/39: 72–73).

What happened in the intervening years between MAM and SPA? It's not clear. Chapman

### 3. How Moorean? Making Sense of Stebbing's Common Sense

We have now a sense of what Stebbing's general approach to metaphysics is and the role common sense plays in it. The question I want to take up here is how much of this common sense picture was influenced by Moore.

Stebbing was first introduced to Moore in London in 1917 (the alleged year of Stebbing's conversion to analytic philosophy) and the two would remain in contact for the rest of their lives. Nearly a decade later, Moore would publish his seminal "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925, henceforth DCS) and, a little more than two decades later, his infamous "Proof of an External World" (1939, henceforth PEW). It's the former paper, however, that seems to have influenced Stebbing's thought the most, as evidenced in the two quotes above (§2) from her own seminal essay, "The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics" (1932/33, henceforth MAM), but also more explicitly in her paper "Constructions" (1933/34, henceforth CON):

I agree with Prof. Moore in holding that the "Common Sense view of the World," is, in certain fundamental features, *wholly* true. I agree with him further in believing that we all, plain men and philosophers alike, have held this. For example, I hold (and I venture to think that you also hold) that there have been "very many other human beings, who have had bodies and have lived upon the earth." Again, at this moment, I *know* that this is a table. I also know that there are trees and rocks (1933/34: 26–27).

(Notice that the quoted material above refers to various passages in Moore's DCS.)

Stebbing's insistence on the truisms of common sense as the starting point of philosophical inquiry is perhaps the most obvious instance of Moore's

(2013) and Beaney and Chapman (2017) suggest that Stebbing may have only endorsed the method of metaphysical analysis in a suppositional way, i.e., as a means of assessing its philosophical plausibility. Whatever the case may be, Stebbing still engaged in metaphysics both after MAM and before SPA.

influence. But his influence is also manifest in Stebbing's work on analysis, specifically, her attempts to distinguish *logical* analysis from *metaphysical* analysis. Stebbing herself registers this influence in MAM:

It is from the writings of Prof. Moore that I have learnt the importance of the method of metaphysical analysis [footnote redacted]. He has not explicitly dealt with the problem of method, but he has shown clearly the necessity of analysis, and has indicated some presuppositions of the use of the method (1932/33: 76).

Stebbing is cautious, however, to ascribe these views to Moore, elaborating in the suppressed footnote above: "I do not wish to suggest that Moore uses this expression [=metaphysical analysis], nor that he would agree with what I say. But if what I say is correct, then I think it could have been derived from a study of his writings" (1932/33: 76, fn.\*).

In fact, it's Stebbing's concession here, and her apprehensiveness in attributing these ideas to Moore, that ultimately speak to the originality and importance of her contributions to the debate surrounding philosophical analysis, something we caught a glimpse of in the previous section.

It's clear, then, that Stebbing was influenced by Moore. But calling her a "disciple of Moore," like Ayer did, is unwarranted. Most Stebbing scholars acknowledge this much. Still, many are tempted by something like Ayer's characterization; something more charitable to be sure, but still a characterization that, more or less, paints a picture of Stebbing as "a committed Moorean" of sorts (Beaney and Chapman 2018: §§3–4).<sup>27</sup>

Recently, Frederique Janssen-Lauret has challenged this Moorean reading of Stebbing, arguing that Stebbing, surprisingly, "disavowed the Common Sense view" (24) and "did not rush to endorse it" (8). How so?

Historians have so far missed this because they take Stebbing's respectful tone towards Moore and her humility in describing her own achievements at face value, and because there has been

<sup>27</sup> See also Milkov (2003) and Beaney (2016: 249–250).

relatively little investigation into Stebbing's philosophy of physics (5).

While acknowledging that Stebbing "greatly valued Moore as a mentor, and was generous with acknowledgments whenever she held a view she took to have originated with Moore" (8) Janssen-Lauret nevertheless goes on to characterize Stebbing as a philosopher that, if anything, more closely resembles Russell than Moore insofar as she "was also [like Russell] on a quest to find a properly scientific philosophy" (21).

Maybe the lesson of all of this is to avoid comparing philosophers. Philosophically speaking, Stebbing clearly resembled *both* of these great philosophers in the relevant respects and this should not be wholly surprising. But she was also, more importantly, very much her own philosopher with her own vision of how philosophy should be done (and here I don't take Janssen-Lauret to disagree). Whether she most resembled Russell or Moore, then, seems largely moot.

I think Janssen-Lauret is right, however, to point out that Stebbing's "respectful tone" and "humility" towards Moore sometimes obfuscated the originality of her contributions. I think Janssen-Lauret is also right when she says that we should avoid subsuming Stebbing's realist position under Moore's Common Sense View. But I think she's wrong to say that Stebbing "disavowed the Common Sense view"—I think that's going too far. Stebbing *did* promulgate a common sense approach to philosophy and I think it's very clear that she did. What's not so clear is whether this common sense view was *Moore's* Common Sense View. Indeed, Moore's Common Sense View and a more general Common Sense View come apart. Moore doesn't have dibs on common sense. So I agree with Janssen-Lauret that we should call Stebbing a "realist" (8), I just don't think that this characterization is fully apt. It's more accurate, I say, to call Stebbing a *common sense* realist. This is at least what I aim to show in the next section (§4). In what remains here, I'll argue that the three reasons Janssen-Lauret offers for ascribing Stebbing a non-Moorean common sense view are unconvincing. Again, however, I don't think this shows that Stebbing *was* a Moorean. My goal here is simply to show that the support Janssen-Lauret advances in favor of the non-Moorean reading is problematic.

### 3.1 *The Counterintuitive Truths of Science and Mathematics*

Unlike Moore, Stebbing was particularly well-versed in logic, mathematics, and the sciences.<sup>28</sup> This apparently, according to Janssen-Lauret, plays a role in how much of Moore's Common Sense View was actually inherited by Stebbing. The idea is that, given Stebbing's knowledge of logic, mathematics, and science, Stebbing *had* to have been much more cautious—or at least more cautious than Moore—about which common sense judgements she accepted as true. For, after all, the science and mathematics of her day had overturned plenty of widely-held beliefs that once seemed (and perhaps still seem!) intuitively or even obviously true (e.g., that two parallel lines never intersect). Taking modern science and mathematics seriously, then, in the way Stebbing did, required her to be more skeptical of common sense than Moore. As Janssen-Lauret says:

Her expertise in the philosophy of science and mathematics, then, implies that she could not have regarded statements like “nothing is the same size as its proper part” and “parallel lines never meet” as acceptable common-sense truths (21).

Janssen-Lauret directs us to a passage from Stebbing's *Modern Introduction to Logic* which drives the point home:

...the common-sense conception of number is to a considerable extent based on intuitions derived from counting, whilst the operation of counting remains unanalysed. Consequently our conception of number is unduly restricted and unclear (Stebbing 1930: 456).

But it's not clear to me how either of these passages establishes what Janssen-Lauret wants them to establish—namely, that Stebbing was more careful than Moore about which common sense propositions she accepted as true.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, Stebbing had originally intended to pursue a degree in science, but suffering from Ménière's disease (which, amongst other things, causes bouts of vertigo) apparently made life in the lab dangerous, and thus was advised to pursue an alternative field. See Chapman (2013) for discussion.

While Stebbing certainly was more knowledgeable and more competent in logic, mathematics, and the sciences than Moore, Moore certainly wasn't woefully ignorant of the advances being made in these fields, nor was he woefully logically or mathematically incompetent.<sup>29</sup> And even if he *was* (as unlikely as that is) Moore was just as cautious and discriminating as Stebbing when it came to which propositions of common sense should be accepted as true. To better appreciate this, consider some of the propositions Moore enumerates in DCS which he takes to be part of the common sense corpus:

- There exists at present a human body which is my body.
- This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes.
- Many human bodies other than mine have before now lived on the earth.
- Many human beings other than myself have before now perceived, dreamed, and felt.
- The earth has existed for many years past.

Notice that this list is quite narrow and reveals the deliberateness of Moore's selection. This is also reflected in Moore's decision to *exclude* propositions like "God exists" and "Human beings continue to exist and be conscious after the death of bodies" from his list. Moore, in fact, says that there is no good reason to suppose that such propositions are commonsensical (or true *in virtue of being commonsensical*) despite belief in them being fairly widely held and despite being taken by many to be commonsensical (Moore 1925: 52).

Moore's overall cautious, particularist approach to philosophy, coupled with his intense respect for clarity, sometimes comes at the expense of a more robust and general "theory of things." Because of this, Moore doesn't have much else to say about the scope or nature of common sense. Whether

<sup>29</sup> Moore's awareness and competence of, e.g., modern mathematical logic, is probably best displayed in his unpublished review of Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics*. See Moore (2018–19).

his list is exhaustive (certainly it's not) or whether common sense should be restricted to the mostly autobiographical and empirical truisms above or whether such truisms have counterparts in logic and mathematics or even particular branches of science, Moore just never says.<sup>30</sup>

So, we might conclude two things. One, that in light of the above, Moore was just as cautious as Stebbing about which common sense judgements ought to be accepted as true (*pace* Janssen-Lauret's claims to the contrary). And that two, given Moore's limited discussions of common sense, it's at best unclear whether he thought certain mathematical or scientific truisms (such as that two parallel lines never intersect) ought to have been counted as part of common sense. Thus, it's at best unclear whether there is any real disagreement between Stebbing and Moore on this front.

### 3.2 *The Compatibility of Realism with Idealism*

Now, as Janssen-Lauret points out, Stebbing seems to have thought that realism was compatible with idealism; that realism doesn't imply the *negation* of idealism. For as Janssen-Lauret claims, Stebbing understood realism as merely being committed to the *truth* of certain common sense claims and not much else (23–24). The job of metaphysical analysis, Stebbing maintained, is to reveal to us what makes our common sense beliefs *true*, and what makes them true could end up favoring realism or idealism. Metaphysical analysis doesn't discriminate. The fact that there are hands, then, according

<sup>30</sup> What he *does* say, however, is this:

The phrases "Common Sense view of the world" or "Common Sense beliefs" (as used by philosophers) are, of course, extraordinarily vague; and, for all I know there may be many propositions which may be properly called features in the "the Common Sense view of the world" or "Common Sense beliefs," which are not true, and which deserve to be mentioned with the contempt with which some philosophers speak of "Common Sense beliefs." But to speak with contempt of those "Common Sense beliefs" which I have mentioned is quite certainly the height of absurdity (Moore 1925: 42).

to Stebbing, doesn't simply entail the falsity of idealism (as Moore seems to think in PEW); such facts *could* be given an idealist analysis. If this is right, then there seems to be a clear difference between how Stebbing and Moore are thinking about common sense and its ontological commitments.

Unfortunately, this story is too simple. Let's grant that Janssen-Lauret is right about Stebbing's views with regards to the ontological commitments of common sense. Is it the case that Moore thought differently?

There is a notorious puzzle here. The puzzle concerns how the Moore of PEW can be reconciled with the Moore of DCS. For the views that Moore espouses in both papers are thought to be inconsistent: in PEW, *here is a hand* entails that there is an external world and is thus thought to be incompatible with idealism; in DCS, *here is a hand* is said to be known with certainty, but insofar as it's not obvious how it should be metaphysically analyzed, an idealist metaphysics needn't be thought to be incompatible with it. Indeed, Part IV of DCS features a near tortuous discussion of Moore struggling to answer (roughly) the following question: how revisionary can our metaphysics get before common sense is no longer compatible with it? Thomas Baldwin suggests that for Moore there is no real upper-bound:

[I]n the last part of the paper [DCS] Moore argues that his defence of common sense leaves completely undecided the question as to how the truistic propositions which make up the common sense view of the world are to be analysed; the analysis may be as radical as one likes as long as it is consistent with the truth and knowability of the propositions analysed. Thus, for example, he is content to allow that philosophical argument may show that a phenomenalist analysis of propositions about the physical world is correct (Baldwin 2004).

Janssen-Lauret seems to assume that PEW is Moore's final word on common sense, but this is far from the case. And while it's true, as Stebbing herself points out above, that Moore never used the word "metaphysical" to describe the sort of analysis he was interested in (and this is indeed where Stebbing's originality and innovation is most apparent), *metaphysical* analysis is clearly at work in DCS in all but name:

It seems to me quite evident that my knowledge that I am now perceiving a human hand is a deduction from a pair of propositions simpler still – propositions which I can only express in the form ‘I am perceiving *this*’ and ‘*This* is a human hand’. It is the analysis of propositions of the latter kind which seems to me to present such great difficulties, while nevertheless the whole question as to the *nature* of material things obviously depends upon their analysis (Moore 1925: 127–8).

The sense of analysis Moore is alluding to here is clearly metaphysical. He talks about the “*nature* of material things” and how by analyzing common sense propositions about material objects like “*This* is a human hand” we are to discover their nature; that the question of their nature depends on such analyses.<sup>31</sup>

True, most philosophers today take Moore to be *the* champion of realism and take Moore’s common sense propositions to be incompatible with radical philosophical views like idealism. But this has more to do with the influence that PEW has had on contemporary philosophy than it has to do with Moore’s complicated views on the matter. Indeed, despite the attention Moore’s Proof has received, PEW is an outlier of sorts. By comparison, DCS is thought to be more central to Moore’s overall views.<sup>32</sup> This isn’t to say that Moore’s views on the matter are clear or decisive—they aren’t; hence the puzzle. Rather, the upshot is that it’s not implausible to think that Stebbing and Moore might have been more on the same page here than Janssen-Lauret’s

<sup>31</sup> Baldwin (2004) is also quite explicit about this.

<sup>32</sup> One reason has to do with the purported philosophical significance DCS had to Moore himself. To appreciate this, one needs to understand the context in which the paper was published. British philosopher J. H. Muirhead had invited Moore to contribute an essay to a volume he was editing titled *Contemporary British Philosophy*. The primary aim of the volume was, in Muirhead’s words, “to give the contributors an opportunity of stating authentically what they regard as the main problem of philosophy and what they have endeavoured to make central in their own speculation” (Muirhead 1924: 10). Given that Moore submitted DCS with these aims in mind, it’s plausible the ideas therein were particularly central to Moore’s philosophical outlook.

argument implies. But if so, then her interpretation incurs another strike.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3 No “*across the board*” Common Sense

The last difference: Stebbing, unlike Moore, denied that the assumptions of common sense are true *across the board*. The idea here goes back to Stebbing’s scientific and mathematical interests. The exciting and new physical theories of Stebbing’s time had implications for how people ordinarily viewed and understood the world; these theories were revisionary and brought about an apparent tension in our common sense beliefs (think: non-Euclidean geometry, the atomic theory of matter, Einstein’s Special Relativity). As Stebbing herself remarks, such theories reinforced “the fact that the world is infinitely more complex than common sense assumes” (Stebbing 1929: 147).

According to Janssen-Lauret, this is just another instance in which Stebbing parted ways with Moore: she allowed certain common sense truths to be metaphysically analyzed in radical ways, especially if that’s what the science demands. Janssen-Lauret summarizes this aspect of Stebbing’s approach:

There is a well-delineated collection of truths about perception, mind, other minds, and external objects which form the basis of philosophical and scientific investigation; together these truths constitute “realism.” They imply that there are multiple things and multiple minds, and those implied statements ought also be respected as realist truths. But they say nothing about the analysis or underlying nature of those things and those minds. They leave open possible analyses which claim that what ultimately accounts for their truth is that everything is made of matter, or everything

<sup>33</sup> There is a further complication here brought on by the fact that both Stebbing and Moore would have taken propositions like *there are external objects* or *there is an external world* as true. Could *these* propositions, however, be given an idealist analysis? I think this would have given both Stebbing and Moore some pause if not be met with outright resistance. I therefore take it that there are *some* constraints on what the assumptions of common sense are and that even though such constraints might go unmentioned in Stebbing’s and Moore’s respective discussions, such constraints are tacitly assumed in them. If correct, this would cast further doubt on Janssen-Lauret’s argument here.

is made of mind, or everything is made of both at the same time, or that mind and matter both exist and stand in complex relationships (25).

But, again, given that the differences between Stebbing and Moore on analysis and the ontological commitments of common sense aren't as deep as Janssen-Laurent assumes (as I've argued above) this argument loses its force.

Again, I agree with Janssen-Laurent that Stebbing is no Moorean (and certainly no "disciple of Moore"). While Stebbing was clearly influenced by Moore (and Russell) in significant ways, she was also her own philosopher and differed from Moore in crucial ways. I just don't think she differed from Moore in the ways Janssen-Laurent thinks she did. Before concluding this section, let me briefly mention just two further ways that I think Stebbing would have taken issue with Moore, especially the Moore of PEW.

First, is Stebbing's general dismissal of questions of the form "What is it to be an F?" Stebbing diagnoses questions like "What is Time?" and "What is force?" as misleading and without sense (1938/39: 78–9) and opines that "It is useless first to *define* 'material thing,' or 'cause' " (1932/33: 74). After all, for Stebbing, such questions form the foundation on which deductive metaphysics is built, a foundation that she sees as a "grave defect" (1932: 74). Recall, however, that the bulk of PEW is spent painfully laboring over what it means for something to be "external." Stebbing would have likely been opposed to Moore's approach here and thought that he was being led astray.<sup>34</sup>

Second, is the way in which Stebbing thinks we have knowledge of the external world. According to Stebbing, we don't *infer* the existence of the

<sup>34</sup> While it's true that Stebbing was adamantly dismissive of such questions, it seems that she was too quick in condemning them (something she herself would likely admit). Indeed, Stebbing needn't banish such questions completely. Rather, it seems that her contentions are with beginning metaphysical inquiry with such questions (as Moore does in PEW). We should, then, be able to start where Stebbing would like us to start, e.g., with common sense facts like there are tables, and in the course of our metaphysical investigations be naturally led to an answer to the question "What is it to be a table?" Such questions, I submit, have their place in a metaphysics that Stebbing would (and should) approve of.

external world from common sense truisms in the way that Moore attempts to do in his proof (roughly: here are two hands, therefore there is an external world). Rather, “there is no problem of justifying an inference to the external world, *since it is not inferred*” (1933/34: 26, emphasis added). For Stebbing, the problem of the external world isn’t one of justification or belief. As she says, “it is a problem of *analyzing* what it is we know when we do know such facts as these” (1933/34: 27). This latter remark is certainly in keeping with the Moore of DCS. Her former remark, however, clashes with the Moore of PEW and, if anything, is closer in spirit to that of Wittgenstein (1969) whose common sense truisms—or, “hinges”—are the sorts of things that are neither justified nor unjustified but are in some sense constitutive of rationality.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Stebbing’s Common Sense Realism

I said above that Moore’s Common Sense View and a more general Common Sense View come apart and that we should think of Stebbing as a *common sense* realist in the latter sense rather than the former. The reasons for this should now be more clear: while Moore certainly was a “common sense philosopher,” his discussions of common sense are limited and his accounts of common sense inconsistent. Stebbing was, by contrast, not only more explicit about her common sense commitments and more consistent, she also put these commitments to work across various domains.

My focus will be on the span of Stebbing’s published work between MAM and “Some Puzzles about Analysis” (SPA). This span is a significant one since Stebbing’s work soon took a more public and social turn after SPA; also it’s these years (roughly 1932 through 1939) that Stebbing had, by then, developed a distinctive philosophical voice. But this time span is interesting for another reason: the works produced attest to Stebbing’s common sense realist inclinations. In fact, what I want to establish here is that Stebbing is (or was) very much a common sense philosopher—a common sense realist—of

<sup>35</sup> For discussion of Stebbing’s relationship to Wittgenstein, see Milkov (2003). For discussion of Stebbing’s relationship to both Moore and Wittgenstein, see Coliva (forthcoming).

the first order.

Let's start first with SPA, the paper where Stebbing sets the record straight about the use of metaphysical analysis in metaphysics. Therein, Stebbing makes a number of remarks which, taken together, suggest a certain way of doing philosophy.

Fairly early on in SPA, Stebbing expresses her resistance to various forms of ontological reductionism and eliminativism, complaining that talk of "reducing the number of objects in the world seems to ... involve a confusion of types" (1938/39: 75). This comes out even more clearly in the following passage:

This trick of making *tables* disappear is responsible for the uneasy question: "But aren't there *really* tables?" Several of us have discussed this question *ad nauseam*, and I believe we are all agreed that there really are tables....I think, indeed, that by now we ought to have given up the foolish habit of trying to reduce the number of objects in the world (1938/39: 75).

The "trick" Stebbing is referring to above are the two ways in which metaphysical analysis can be put to work:

I believe that those who have employed directional analysis [=metaphysical analysis] have assumed that a directional analysis of, for example, "This is a table," would enable us to dispense with the word "table" or, alternatively, to get rid of the object *table* (1938/39: 74–75).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Stebbing seems here to be picking up on a distinction that Quine (1951) would later make more explicit: the distinction between ideology and ontology. The former refers to a theory's undefined terms and concepts while the latter refers to the objects that a theory must posit in order for it to be true. Dispensing with the word "table" would minimize one's ideological commitments, while dispensing with tables would minimize one's ontological commitments. But Stebbing seems to find both equally as confused (although if anything it seems she would be more friendly to the former than the latter).

Notice, however, that the passage immediately above this one is in *response* to the two distinct ways that Stebbing says philosophers have employed metaphysical analysis. One of those ways—the way that entails getting rid of the object *table*—Stebbing clearly finds confused, disparaging such a move by calling it “a foolish habit.” So it’s clear that Stebbing is no anti-realist about tables and other ordinary objects. Nor does she seem to have given up on common sense, for she concludes SPA by posing a question which she then instantly answers: “How do these conclusions bear upon the defence of common sense? The answer is that common sense needs no defence (1938/39: 84).”

A picture is starting to develop: that of a philosopher who is unpersuaded by the ontological minimalist’s urge to *reduce* or *eliminate* certain objects at the expense of common sense. And, indeed, this anti-minimalist sensibility seems to never have left Stebbing. In a slightly earlier essay, CON, Stebbing expresses her skepticism about using methodological principles like Occam’s razor to tidy up our ontological commitments:

I sometimes find myself wishing that Occam’s razor (to give it the customary inappropriate name) had never been discovered....Certainly Occam’s razor states a sound methodological principle, provided it be stated in the form *Entities must not be multiplied without necessity*, even if it leaves us a little in the dark as to how we are to judge when there *is* necessity. But in my opinion it is absurd to regard Occam’s Razor as providing a constitutive principle (1933/34: 17).

Occam’s razor is often wielded by the ontological minimalist to justify the elimination of certain entities (typically the entities of common sense). But Stebbing would have likely found this to be a gross misuse of the razor and a severely misjudged instance of “necessity.”

Stebbing’s common sense realist inclinations also extend to the temporal realm. Bits and pieces of Stebbing’s philosophy of time (if it can be called that) make their debut in incomplete and fragmented form in her 1936 contribution “Some Ambiguities in Discussions Concerning Time” to the volume *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*. While much of

that paper is devoted to discussion and criticism of McTaggart's infamous paradox, one gets a sense of where Stebbing's philosophical sympathies lie on matters related to the metaphysics of time. For example, Stebbing says that temporal notions like futurity, presentness, and pastness are all "mutually irreducible" and that "*will be, is now, and was* are each unique; they cannot be analysed in terms of each other, nor in terms of anything else" (1936: 116). She then says that the reality of the past and the future "comes perilously near to being nonsense ..." (1936: 118).

These remarks all seem to support a broadly A-theoretic philosophy of time, more specifically, one that most closely resembles presentism, the view that only present events, objects, and times really exist, and the view of time widely taken to be most commonsensical. These broadly A-theoretic commitments resurface throughout the paper, especially when Stebbing proposes to analyze statements about the reality of the past and future as statements about whether such and such *was* or *will* be the case:

To say that the past is real is to say *something has happened*, or, in other words, it is to say that *so and so is past* is true for some instance falling under the description 'so and so'. And similarly for the future and the present. ...There is *no other* significance in the statement that the past is real; there only seems to be some other significance when we fallaciously regard *the past* as a quasi-substantive. So with *the future* (1936: 118).

Notice here that Stebbing seems to be denying that the existence of the past and future are presupposed in our tenseless talk since such talk is elliptical with tensed statements (perhaps ones involving tensed operators like "It will be the case that..." or predicate modifiers like "WAS (is crossing the Rubicon)"). And in the paragraph prior she argues that those who are led to assume the existence of the past and future do so on the mistaken assumption that time is like a box or container, a mistake she believes is "analogous to the mistake of regarding space as a kind of tenuous box or receptacle." (1936: 118). She therefore seems to reject the *spatialization* of time endorsed by B-theorists, eternalists in particular.

Then, a few pages later, we get this:

Perhaps that which *has happened* cannot be demonstratively referred to; certainly that which *will happen* can be referred to only descriptively. We can, if we like, signalize this description by saying that the past and the future are ‘constructions’, but if we do so we must be careful to notice that *being a construction* does not entail *being unreal* (1936: 119).

Stebbing seems to realize that if the past and future don’t exist, statements about the past and future *prima facie* don’t refer to anything. Intuitively, one would have thought that the truth-conditions of “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” involve Caesar, the Rubicon and the relations obtaining between them. But if neither Caesar nor past times exist, then this can’t be. What, then, do statements about the past and future refer to if not past and future times and objects?

Stebbing responds by suggesting that we think of the past and future as “constructions” and it’s these constructions that sentences about the past and future are ultimately about and make reference to (at least from our presently existing vantage point). So, perhaps, “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” refers to one such construction. But constructions of what? Stebbing doesn’t exactly say. Still, the suggestion is interesting and anticipates (far in advance!) contemporary views in the philosophy of time such as temporal ersatzism and temporal fictionalism.<sup>37</sup>

Stebbing’s remark above is intriguing for two additional reasons. The first is that Stebbing thinks constructions—be they fictional, social, mental—don’t necessarily entail being *unreal*. So notice again that even in this context Stebbing is resistant to taking eliminativist approaches. Second, in saying this, Stebbing (perhaps under the influence of early Russell)<sup>38</sup> seems to presuppose a Meinongian metaontology, one that distinguishes between the subsistent on the one hand, and the existent-non-existent and the real-unreal on the other. In an early paper from 1917/18 investigating the verb “to be,” for

<sup>37</sup> For a survey of the former see Emery (2017). For the latter view see Baron, Miller, Tallant (2019).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Russell (1903). See also Moore (1936).

example, we find Stebbing saying that “*real-unreal* is a subdivision of the *existent*, and that the *subsistent* is neither real nor unreal, but is a logical form of being” (1917/18: 585). But in taking this into account, it no longer becomes clear whether Stebbing is thinking of such constructions as merely subsisting things, or *unreal* but existing things—both seem to be consistent with Stebbing’s remarks that being a construction doesn’t necessarily entail being unreal.<sup>39,40</sup>

Finally, in Stebbing’s book *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937), published only one year before SPA, we encounter Stebbing’s borderline scathing rebuke of two prominent physicists—Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jean—whose philosophical worldviews Stebbing finds dangerously muddled.

Consider Eddington’s (1928: ix) ideas on how our understanding of solidity changes in light of the atomic theory of matter: ordinary objects like tables and chairs are largely empty space occupied by a swarm of electrons. Eddington seems to think this entails that ordinary objects like tables and chairs aren’t really *solid* despite appearances to the contrary. Hence, he concludes that there were really two of everything, e.g., two tables: the scientific

<sup>39</sup> The difference matters here since it alters Stebbing’s philosophy of time (at least as contained within her 1936 essay).

<sup>40</sup> Stebbing says that such constructions are also found in science. (Although, what Stebbing calls “constructs” below seems to be playing a slightly different role than they’re playing above.) She says:

Now, it is undoubtedly true that there are ‘elements’ in the ‘scientific world’ that have no familiar counterparts. I shall call them constructs. Their function, in my opinion, is to help us in the correlation of experience, i.e., in the ordering of what is sensibly experienced. Hamiltonian functions, potentials, the aether, are examples of such constructs....We can certainly say that Hamiltonian functions are the work of men; the same can be said of the luminiferous aether (1937: 84–85).

Stebbing says that certain entities of science and mathematics, such as Hamiltonian functions, are “the work of men” hence, perhaps, making them useful fictions or social constructions. Certainly, however, Stebbing wouldn’t want to say that the past and future are like this. But, then, if not, it’s unclear what Stebbing means by “constructs” in the first place.

table (the “empty” table) and the table of common sense (the “solid” table). Predictably, however, Stebbing finds this “two-table” ontology preposterous and insists that there is only one table and that it is solid:

The danger arises when the scientist uses the picture for the purpose of making explicit denials, and expresses those denials in common-sense language used in such a way as to be devoid of sense (1937: 51).

It is of the utmost important effort to press the question: If the plank appears to be *solid*, but is really *non-solid*, what does “solid” mean? If “solid” has no assignable meaning, then “non-solid” is also without sense. If the plank is non-solid, then where can we find an example to show us what “solid” means? The pairs of words, “solid”-“empty”, “solid”-“hollow”, “solid”-“porous”, belong to the vocabulary of common-sense language; in the case of each pair, if one of the two is without sense, so is the other (1937: 53)

And later, continuing the critique in SPA:

“Is that floor really solid?” is a sensible question to ask if we are uncertain whether the floor is as solid as it looks or whether perhaps it has got dry rot in it. But it is not a sensible question to ask if we are asking it because we are thinking that physicists have informed us that wood consists of elections [sic] so widely spaced that the wood can be said to be “mostly emptiness.” In the first context the question has sense and resembles in form the question, “Is that really an apple?” asked by someone who thinks he has been offered a medlar or perhaps an “apple” made of soap. In the second context the question is not sensible because no answer could be given to it of an appropriate logical form. The similarity of grammatical form has misled us (1938/39: 79).

Curiously, Stebbing talks of a “common sense language” which misleadingly suggests that her quibblings are the pedantic quibblings of an ordinary language philosopher. But we know that this interpretation is far too quick.

For we know that Stebbing wasn't exactly of the mindset that philosophical problems could be dissolved by language.<sup>41</sup> From SPA:

I am sorry to say that I have either never understood or do not agree with the view that our problems are only problems with regard to the correct usage of words. I do not regard myself as incapable of conversion to this point of view but I have not yet seen the light (1938/39: 80).

Now, it could very well be the case that Stebbing's contentions with Edgington's philosophy were made in the *spirit* of any run-of-the-mill ordinary language philosopher (despite her not identifying with such an approach), but I think it's more accurate, in light of all the above, to characterize them as the quibblings of a hard core common sense realist. One who despite having a deep and lasting respect for science, knew how to distinguish the profound achievements of science from its practitioners' profound distortions of it.

In the analytic tradition, Moore is thought to be *the* "philosopher of common sense." But compared to Moore, Stebbing wasn't as shy about her common sense commitments. Compared to Moore, Stebbing's common sense approach ran the gamut: from ordinary objects to temporal ontology and methodological principles. Stebbing even pitted these commitments up against the unhinged philosophical ruminations of contemporary science, something Moore never attempted nor shown much interest in. Stebbing was a common sense realist if there was any and deserves a place not only in the history of analytic philosophy, but in the common sense tradition as well.

<sup>41</sup> See also footnote 21.

## References

- Ayer, A. J. (1977). *Part of My Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baldwin, Tom (2004). “George Edward Moore.” In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/moore/>
- Baron, Sam, Kriste Miller, and Jonathan Tallant (2019). “Temporal Fictionalism for a Timeless World.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 00: 1–21.
- Beaney, Michael and Siobhan Chapman (2017). “Susan Stebbing.” In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/stebbing/>.
- Beaney, Michael (2000). “Conceptions of Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy.” *Acta Analytica* 15: 97–115.
- (2003). “Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna Analysis.” In Friedrich Stadler (ed.) *The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism: Re-evaluation and Future Perspectives*, 339–350. Dordrecht, Springer.
- (2016). “Susan Stebbing and the Early Reception of Logical Empiricism in Britain.” In Christian Damböck (ed.), *Influences on the Aufbau*, 233–256. Cham, Springer.
- (2017). *Analytic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Black, Max (1932/33). “Philosophical Analysis.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 33: 237–258.
- Chapman, Siobhan (2013). *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eddington, A.S. (1928). *The Nature of the Physical World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Chisholm, Roderick (1973). *The Problem of the Criterion*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Coliva, Annalisa (forthcoming). “Stebbing, Moore (and Wittgenstein) on Common Sense and Metaphysical Analysis.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. [10.1080/09608788.2021.1936447](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2021.1936447)

- Emery, Nina (2017). “Temporal ersatzism.” *Philosophy Compass* 12: 1–13.
- Janssen-Lauret, Frederique (forthcoming). “Susan Stebbing’s Metaphysics and the Status of Common-Sense Truths.” In J. Peijnenburg and S. Verhaegh (eds.), *Women in the History of Analytic Philosophy*. Springer Nature.
- (2017). “Susan Stebbing, Incomplete Symbols and Foundherentist Meta-Ontology.” *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 5: 7–17.
- Kouri Kissel, Teresa (2019). “Susan Stebbing.” *Portale Italiano Di Filosofia Analytica* 19: 1–36.
- McSweeney, Michaela (forthcoming). “Metaphysics as Essentially Imaginative and Aiming at Understanding.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Milkov, Nikolay (2003). “Susan Stebbing’s Criticism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.” In Friedrich Stadler (ed.), *The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism: Re-evaluations and Future Perspectives*, 351–63. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Moore, G.E. (1925). “A Defence of Common Sense.” In *Philosophical Papers*. New York: Collier Books. Originally published in London by George Allen & Unwin (1959).
- (1936). “Is Existence a Predicate?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 15: 154–88.
- (1939). “Proof of an External World.” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25: 273–300.
- (2018–19). “G.E. Moore’s Unpublished Review of *The Principles of Mathematics*.” *Russell: the Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies* 38: 131–164.
- Muirhead, J.H. (ed.) (1925). *Contemporary British Philosophy* 2. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Quine, W.V. (1951). “Ontology and Ideology.” *Philosophical Studies* 2: 11–25.
- Russell, Bertrand (1903). *The Principles of Mathematics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- (1922). “Introduction to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.” London: Kegan Paul.
- Sider, Theodore (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford: Oxford

- University Press.
- Stebbing, L.S. (1917/18). "The Philosophical Importance of the Verb 'To Be'." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 18: 582–589.
- (1929). "Realism and Modern Physics." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 9: 146–161.
- (1932/33). "The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 33: 65–94.
- (1933/34). "Constructions." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 34: 1–30.
- (1934). "Directional Analysis and Basic Facts." *Analysis* 2: 33–36.
- (1936). "Some Ambiguities in Discussions Concerning Time." In Raymond Klibansky and H.J. Paton (eds.), *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, 107–123. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- (1937). *Philosophy and the Physicists*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- (1938/39). "Some Puzzles about Analysis." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 39: 69–84.
- (1939). *Thinking to Some Purpose*. London: Penguin Books.
- Willow, Morgan Grace (1995). "L. Susan Stebbing." In Mary Ellen Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers Vol. 4*, 125–155. Dordrecht, Springer.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1921). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (1969). *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.