

To Jody

Stebbing on Clarity¹

By Eric Schliesser

The main aim of this paper is to analyze Susan Stebbing's views on the nature of clarity in the 1930s. I limit myself to this period because it allows for a contrast between her sophisticated and significant views on what I call 'the standard conception of clarity' with her view on 'democratic clarity' developed in her (1939) *Thinking to Some Purpose*. I contextualize her views with some alternative characterizations of clarity on offer among other early analytic philosophers (including brief discussions of Carnap, Quine, Price, and Nagel). While my focus is on Stebbing, I show, thereby, that in the great age of clarification in early analytic philosophy there were was no ~~clarity~~ or consensus on the nature of clarity. This helps illuminate some of the by now well-known difficulties in treating analytic philosophy as a unified project. The other pay-off of my approach should be the start of taxonomy of the kinds of clarity in early analytic philosophy.

Before I give a summary of the main sections of this paper, a cautionary note by way of some terminological clarification. In what follows I am largely unconcerned with the origin and value placed on writing perspicuously or expressing oneself lucidly, that is what hereafter I shall call, 'presentational clarity.' Some analytic philosophers quite clearly prized such presentational clarity, especially in the context of polemics with (say) Bradley and his followers or, later, Heidegger and his followers.

In the first section, I focus on the early modern ways of ideas, and Pierce's discussion and criticism of it, in order to set up discussion of the structure of what I call 'the standard conception of clarity' in early analytic philosophy. In the second section, I show that the standard conception of clarity is indeed standard and with the help of Stebbing's interpretation of Wittgenstein I point to an ambiguity in it. In the third section, and drawing her fourfold characterization of analysis, I also show that the standard conception smooths over considerable heterogeneity. I develop this point by looking at the significance of Stebbing's largely – despite Ayer's alertness to it -- overlooked treatment of what she calls 'analytic clarification of concepts.' I show that Stebbing anticipates themes commonly associated with Quine and Kuhn. In the fourth section I put the distinctiveness of Stebbing's accounts of clarity in context by looking at Nagel's and a Carnapian conception of clarity. In the fifth section, I focus on the role and nature of what I call 'democratic clarity' in *Thinking to Some Purpose*. It turns that this is quite distinct from the standard conception of clarity. I emphasize Stebbing's contribution to articulating the pre-conditions of deliberative democracy, but I also highlight some of the lacunae in her analysis.

1. Prelude: from the way of Ideas to How to Make our Ideas clear.

From Descartes to Hume, the so-called 'way of ideas,' was devoted to the notion that clarity is a desirable and potential property or quality of ideas. I don't mean to suggest that after this way was abandoned clarity disappeared wholly as a philosophical ideal; the subsequent German age

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embraced, at least briefly, *Aufklärung* for individuals and society alike. One cannot help notice that *Aufklärung* shares a common root with clarification [*klärung*]. But while clarity was not ignored during the nineteenth century altogether, until our ongoing 'age of analysis' clarity was at best a lower, philosophical virtue.

Somewhat frustratingly, other than being a desirable quality of our ideas because clarity is a mark or a sign of truth, it's much harder to say what clarity is in the way of ideas.² In his (1878) "How to make our ideas clear," Peirce mocks a definition that he attributes to Leibniz, to wit that clarity is "the clear apprehension of everything contained in the definition" of the notion one is clear about.³ I'd be surprised this idea is really found in Leibniz.⁴ But fairly or not, Peirce does put his finger on one of the problems with the way of ideas, which was not so clear on clarity as one would have wished. One often gets the impression that among the early moderns a certain kind of acquaintance (in Russell's sense) with the experience of clarity of one's ideas is simply assumed.⁵

Peirce revived the notion that clarity is a quality of one's ideas or, as shall be clear from what follows, one's conception. Peirce's major contribution to the subject is not so much to explain what clarity is, but restart discussion of how we can attain it, although these are not entirely distinct for him. For, he proposed the following "rule" (known as a precursor to the pragmatic maxim) to attain clarity: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."⁶

Clarity, then, for Peirce is in the first instance not so much a particular quality of our ideas, but more akin to a kind of second order effect of a proper conception, which is, in turn, the effect of a successful kind of enquiry. This proper conception itself is attained by a species of verification; if that is too misleading and too anachronistic here, substitute for 'verification' a practical understanding of what one may do with such a conception. Once one has completed the verification or survey of the effects of the conception one is exploring then one attains clarity about the conception.

I doubt Peirce's approach to clarity influenced clarity's high status in early analytic philosophy, but Stebbing was familiar with it.⁷ But as I argue in the next section in more detail, Peirce anticipates

² *locus classicus* on the way of ideas is John Yolton *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1956. This also includes non-trivial discussion of what different thinkers might have meant by 'clarity' and its cognates. I am unaware, alas, of a standard account of the evolving ideas notions of clarity in the way of the ideas.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce "How to Make our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (January 1878), 286-302.

⁴ For sophisticated account of Leibniz's views on clarity, see Justin EH Smith "Confused Perception and Corporeal Substance in Leibniz." *The Leibniz Review* 13 (2003): 45-64, see especially note 38 (on p. 63). McQuillan, J. Colin. (2017) "Clarity and Distinctness in Eighteenth Century Germany." *Leibniz en Dialogo*, edited by Rodríguez, Manuel Sánchez, and Miguel Escribano Cabeza, Sevilla: Themata, pp. 149-160. I thank John Callanan and Stefan Heßbrüggen for the suggestions.

⁵ It's tempting to say that 'clarity' was taken to be primitive, un-analyzed notion within the way of ideas. But this is not true. All of the thinkers say something about it such that one can often say quite a bit about what they *would* say about clarity if pressed.

⁶ C.S. Peirce (1878),- op. cit. 293.

⁷ Stebbing mentions the essay explicitly when she reviewed some of Peirce's *Collected Papers*. See Stebbing, L. Susan. "Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Vol. IV: The Simplest Mathematics; Vol. V: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism. Edited by Charles Hartshorn and Paul Weiss.(Cambridge, USA; Harvard University Press; London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford. 1933. Vol. IV. Pp. x+ 601; 1934: Vol. V. Pp. xii+ 455. Price: Vol. IV, 5, 21s.)." *Philosophy* 11.41 (1936): 117, where she notes that "pragmaticism" is the "doctrine Peirce regarded as essentially a method for making our ideas clear." She also praises Peirce's "unusually penetrating apprehension of the fact that muddled thinking and the unclear use of language go together; that to clarify thought we must pay attention to language, and that in so doing we shall be led to a theory of signs." I thank Michael Kremer for alerting me to this review.

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something of the structure or form of thought about clarity among early analytic philosophers. By this I do not mean the adoption of verificationism in Vienna or a kind of pragmatism that runs through (say) early Wittgenstein and Frank Ramsey. But rather he anticipates the idea that a certain process of investigation/enquiry leads to clarity. That is, clarity is the fruits of analysis.

2. The Standard Conception of Clarity in Early Analytic Philosophy.

It is uncontroversial that from its start, analytic philosophy presupposes that, to quote from a well-known lecture by G.E. Moore, "It helps you to be clear, (the desirability of clarity being assumed)."⁸ This was published in the second issue of *Analysis*, a journal Stebbing helped found (and her name is listed as one of its co-editors on the masthead). It's natural to assume, and not wholly wrong, that 'clarity' here refers to presentational clarity. What follows is not intended to deny the significance of a commitment to presentational clarity to the development of early analytic philosophy. But I do argue that this was not what was thought distinctive of the movement, nor what early critics of the enterprise complained about.⁹

In By 1945, H.H. Price summarized a whole range of *criticisms* of analytic philosophy with the slogan "Clarity is not enough,"¹⁰ (the title of Price's lecture and also a 1963 volume edited by H.D. Lewis that leads with a reprint of this lecture).¹¹ It's less clear, however, what clarity amounts to. For example, in Price the *standard* conception of clarity just is the *fruits* or *effect* of analysis. He writes: "I propose to use the words "clarification" and "analysis" (both of which are metaphors after all) as if they were synonymous." (Price 1945: 3) But, unfortunately, he does not unpack the metaphors.¹² So, analysis aims at clarity, or analysis clarifies.¹³ But this raises the question what clarity is and to say so *not* by way of negative ostension or contrasting example – say, 'British/absolute idealism' (back then), 'continental philosophy' (more recently) – but concretely.

⁸ "The Justification of Analysis: Notes of a Lecture", G. E. Moore and Margaret Masterman, *Analysis*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jan., 1934), pp. 28-30

⁹ I have defended the claim that 'analytic philosophy' gets baptized in the modern sense by Ernest Nagel in his Nagel, Ernest. "Impressions and Appraisals of Analytic Philosophy in Europe. I," *The Journal of Philosophy* 33.1 (1936a): 5-24 and Nagel, Ernest. "Impressions and appraisals of analytic philosophy in Europe. II," *the Journal of Philosophy* 33.2 (1936b): 29-53. Schliesser, Eric. "Philosophic prophecy." *Philosophy and its history: Aims and methods in the study of early modern philosophy* (2013): 209-35. Ayer describes the British variant as a "movement" in Ayer, A. J. (1936) "The Analytic Movement in Contemporary Philosophy," *Actes du Congres International de Philosophie Scientifique*. Vol VIII, Paris: Hermann, p. 53.

¹⁰ Price, H. H. "The Inaugural Address: Clarity Is Not Enough." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 19:(1945): 1-31.

¹¹ Lewis, Hywel David, ed. *Clarity is not enough: essays in criticism of linguistic philosophy*. Routledge, 2016.

¹² I use 'standard' because Price himself also offers a new, additional conception of clarity, what he calls 'synoptic' clarity which is the effect of "a conceptual scheme which brings out certain systematic relationships between the [known] matters of fact" (Price 1945: 29). See also my treatment of Stebbing on analytic clarification of a concept and Quine's views in section 4 below.

¹³ In fact, this is one of the evident commitments of Moore back in 1934. We shall be clearer when (C)) "That philosophic analysis will make us clearer *when we are doing philosophy*, i.e. *philosophy* is worth doing for its own sake. (a) When you are understanding the analysis itself, because this understanding sometimes produces a specific kind of clearness which is worth having for its own sake. (b) When understanding an analysis helps you to answer other philosophic questions." (G. E. Moore and Margaret Masterman, op. cit., p. 29).

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I do not mean to suggest that treating clarity as the fruits of analysis itself is idiosyncratic in the early analytic tradition.¹⁴ For, example, it clearly echoes a famous passage in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (in Ogden's translation):

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions," but to make propositions clear.

Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.—4.112

In his "Introduction" to the *Tractatus*, Russell called attention to this very passage (and the material leading up 4.16), that on Wittgenstein's conception "The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear." On the combined authority of Russell and Wittgenstein, then, the claim that philosophical analysis generates clarity will be, henceforth, dubbed 'the standard conception' of clarity.

However, in the quoted material in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* there is an oscillation between propositions and thoughts. And in both cases (thoughts and propositions) there is something of a mystery how they could be more or less clear and, say, remain the same entity. Once one starts pressing on what propositions are supposed to be matters do not get easier. For, at one point Wittgenstein claims, explicitly following Frege and Russell, that a proposition just is "a function of the expressions contained in it." (3.318) Understanding such functions is the road toward clarity, and so on.

I am, then, suggesting that the details of what a particular conception of analysis is about and the tools used in it are going to matter quite a bit in constraining how one conceives of clarity. Not to put too fine a point on it, but it is the nature of one's analysis that explains the kind of clarity one ends up with on the standard conception.

For example, at a suitable level of generality (and vagueness), it is natural to understand Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein as agreeing that one can design a logical symbolism or formal language to supply the means of analysis. What is clarified thereby is the language or linguistic structure (of, say, mathematics--now stipulating with Paul Samuelson that it is a language--) analyzed.¹⁵ Wittgenstein also thought that analysis could be applied to the way logical symbolism is used in one's analysis. One could thereby learn to avoid, say, not merely equivocations and ambiguity of the language analyzed but also avoid confusions about language caused by one's symbolic language of analysis, including the specialist one(s) deployed by the analyst.¹⁶

Notice that in addition to thoughts and propositions (and functions), I have now somewhat cavalierly suggested that language or at least language-use can be clarified, too. That is, to repeat, the details

¹⁴ Near the start of his lecture, Price notes correctly that "the word "analysis," it is true, was sometimes associated with a particular school of philosophers, the so-called Cambridge school. But many Philosophers who did not subscribe to all the tenets and methods of that school would have agreed with this conception." (Price 1945: 3)

¹⁵ Khan, M. Ali. "The irony in/of economic theory." *MLN* 108.4 (1993): 759-803 (which draws on Wittgenstein).

¹⁶ This whole paragraph is indebted to Michael Kremer "The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense: Reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", in Michael Beaney (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy* (2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Oct. 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238842.013.0035>, accessed 16 May 2023.

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of the kind of analysis one uses matters to the kind of clarity one can achieve in the standard conception of clarity.

It is worth noting that in her (1933) lecture, "Logical positivism and analysis," Stebbing understands the very same material in Wittgenstein just discussed as follows: "that to clarify our thought we must understand the logic of our language." And she goes on to claim that this "understanding is achieved when we have discerned the principles of symbolism, and can thus answer the question how it is that sentences mean."¹⁷ My interest here is not to contest Stebbing's reading of Wittgenstein (who she treats as a kind of verificationist of the sort commonly associated with a naïve strand of logical positivism—she clearly relies on Schlick's reading of Wittgenstein). But here clarity involves a kind of semantic understanding that allows one to *do* certain things: according to her Wittgenstein "is thus concerned to lay down certain principles in accordance with which language can be so used as to construct significant propositions."¹⁸ That is, semantic understanding is the basis for a certain know-how. I mention this not because I agree with Stebbing's reading of the *Tractatus*, but to note that even Wittgenstein's presentational clarity can give rise to many kinds of informed interpretations of what he thinks clarification really is. Part of the issue lurking here is that presentational clarity is not just a feature of one's prose, but also an interaction with the audience's expectations and knowledge.

Be that as it may, on the standard position, clarity is the fruits of analysis. This is best understood not so much as a quality of ideas or propositions, but more a second order effect on the conception of the analysist of the matter analyzed (that is, the analysandum). Of course, what is analyzed and the manner of analysis may well change the nature of this second order of effect. So, lurking in the standard position, which uniformly treats clarity as the effect and desideratum of (successful) analysis, is a possible equivocation about what is fundamentally achieved. I explore the ramifications of this in the next section.

3. Stebbing on Analytic Clarification.

If clarity is the effect of analysis (the 'standard conception'), then its character is, at least in part, determined by the nature of analysis. By the 1930s it was sufficiently clear that different kinds of analysis were being practiced alongside each other. In fact, in her (1933) "Logical positivism and analysis," Stebbing made this very point explicit: "there are various kinds of analysis." She lists "four different kinds," although in context it's possible she thinks there are more. "These four kinds are: (1) analytic definition of a symbolic expression; (2) analytic clarification of a concept; (3) postulational analysis; (4) directional analysis."¹⁹ At the First International Congress for the Unity of Science (1936), Ayer called attention to this passage, and helps explain its polemical significance; that in her "pamphlet," Stebbing charges that "the logical positivists have confused the first three."²⁰

On the standard conception of clarity each of these kinds of analysis generates a clarity proper to it. In all cases this should involve a better understanding of the analysandum, including disambiguation, removal of equivocation, and/or the re-formulation in a more precise language (of symbolic logic).

¹⁷ Susan L. Stebbing (1933) "Logical positivism and analysis," *From the Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 10

¹⁸ Stebbing 1933, op. cit., p. 11

¹⁹ Stebbing 1933, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁰ Ayer, A. J. (1936) "The Analytic Movement in Contemporary Philosophy," *Actes du Congres International de Philosophie Scientifique*. Vol VIII, Paris: Hermann, p. 58.

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Of course, it's possible that the kind of fruit born by these four kinds of analysis belongs to the same genus, but one cannot simply assume so, and Stebbing (rightly) does not. For Stebbing thinks that "the analytic clarification of a concept differs considerably from the other three kinds of analysis."²¹ In this section I explain the significance of this remark.

While Stebbing's views on and practice of postulational and directional -- which she sometimes calls 'metaphysical' -- analysis have received considerable and increasing attention,²² her views on analytic clarification much less so even in some of the best work on Stebbing.²³ What she means by 'analytic clarification of a concept' has not been understood properly with the possible exception of Ayer.

In his review of the Schilpp volume on Moore, Ernest Nagel highlights Stebbing's paper, and mentions her judgment that "Moore's lasting influence is to be found in the "same level analysis " of common-sense propositions he has stimulated-" in the analytic definition of expressions and in the analytic clarification of concepts "-rather than in his "directional" or "new level analysis " of them."²⁴ Nagel does not elaborate on this (or the terms). The phrase 'analytic clarification' seems, in fact, -- despite its seeming familiarity -- not much used in Stebbing's lifetime. I have not found analytic clarification connected to a concept in the literature outside her writings.²⁵

At first sight, it is no surprise that Stebbing's analytic clarification of a concept has received little attention. For in 1933 she introduces us to it by saying that it "consists in the elimination of elements supposed to be referred to whenever we use a symbol "S", but which are not such that these elements must be referred to whenever we so use a sentence containing "S" that the sentence says what is true."²⁶ It is no surprise that in order to make sense of this remark some of have

²¹ Stebbing 1933, op. cit., p. 29.

²²For recent careful work on Stebbing's views on directional/metaphysical analysis see, Annalisa Coliva "Stebbing, Moore (and Wittgenstein) on common sense and metaphysical analysis." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 29.5 (2021): 914-934; Douglas, Alexander X., and Jonathan Nassim. "Susan Stebbing's logical interventionism." *History and Philosophy of Logic* 42.2 (2021): 101-117.

²³ For example, back in 2003, in his "Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna Analysis," *The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism: Re-Evaluation and Future Perspectives* edited by F. Stadler, Dordrecht: Kluwer, Michael Beaney assimilates Stebbing's idea of 'analytic clarification of a concept' to Russell's 'paradigm' of analysis. Beaney writes, "I might say 'It is false that the present King of France is bald', and take myself (as Meinong and the early Russell did) to be referring to some subsistent (as opposed to existent) object. According to Russell's theory of descriptions, I am saying something true, despite my confusion as to what I am referring. What we have, then, is also paraphrastic analysis – the aim being here, though, to 'analyse away' a problematic expression." (343-344) Later in (2016) "Susan Stebbing and the Early Reception of Logical Empiricism in Britain," in *Influences on the Aufbau* ed. By Christian Damböck (Dordrecht: Springer), Beaney simply skips discussing the analytic clarification of a concept after mentioning its existence. In his (2021) SEP entry on Stebbing with Chapman, they do not mention it. (See Beaney, Michael and Siobhan Chapman, "Susan Stebbing", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/stebbing/>.)

More recently, Karl Egerton (2021) "Susan Stebbing and the Truthmaker Approach to Metaphysics," *Logique & Analyse* (256) also assimilates 'analytic clarification' to paradigmatic analysis, but is not much interested in exploring it. Beaney and Egerton ignore Stebbing's claim that analytic clarification is a different kind of analysis.

²⁴ Nagel, Ernest. "The Philosophy of G.E. Moore." *Mind*, Vol. 53, No. 209 (Jan., 1944), 71. He is quoting S. Stebbing (1942) "Moore's Influence," in *The philosophy of G.E. Moore*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 528.

²⁵ Cf. Nagel, Ernest. "Impressions and Appraisals of Analytic Philosophy in Europe. I." *The Journal of Philosophy* 33.1 (1936): 16, where it is connected to clarification of 'ideas.' Stace, W. T. "Can speculative philosophy be defended?." *The Philosophical Review* 52.2 (1943): 120, where it is connected to clarification of 'meaning.'

²⁶ Stebbing (1933), op. cit., p. 30.

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connected it to Russell's paradigmatic account of analysis despite her warning that it is very different from the usual kind of analysis.²⁷

In fact, she goes on to say that such analysis "is due to the fact that we often manage to say something which is true although in so saying we believe ourselves to be referring to what is not in fact the case, and are thus also saying something false."²⁸ As stated this seems unpromising and has the air of paradox, without having the clarity of the more familiar paradox of analysis.²⁹

Ayer, however, treats analytic clarification of concepts as significant and had alerted his audience, correctly, that on Stebbing's view Einstein's treatment of simultaneity is a paradigmatic instance of it.³⁰ What Stebbing has in mind when discussing analytic clarification of a concept is made evident in the discussion of what follows. For, she introduces the very idea of an analytic clarification of a concept in order to handle instances where a previously relatively successful scientific theory requires non-trivial revision after what we would now call a 'paradigm change.' Her examples are, in fact, 'mass,' 'force,' and 'simultaneity' with explicit reference to Newton and, and as Ayer had noted, Einstein. Here's what she writes. It is terse, and she acknowledges she lacks time to develop it in context:

Examples of concepts which have been thus clarified are mass, force, simultaneity. The need for such analytic clarification is due to the fact that we often manage to say something which is true although in so saying we believe ourselves to be referring to what is not in fact the case, and are thus also saying something false. This happens when we understand to some extent what we are saying but do not understand clearly exactly what we are saying; hence, we suppose something to be essential to the truth of what we say which is, however, not essential. Certainly Newton did not clearly understand what he was referring to when he spoke of "force", but he often said what was nevertheless true when he used sentences containing "force". A striking example is provided by the concept of simultaneity. Before Einstein had asked the question how we determine whether two events are simultaneous, we thought we knew quite well what was meant by saying 'happening at the same time in London and New York'. Einstein has made us see that we did not know quite well what we meant; we now understand that what we thought to be essential is not so. This analytic clarification of a concept cannot be made quite tidy. It involves a change in the significance of all statements in which the concept occurs.³¹

Ever since Kuhn, we tend to discuss examples like this in terms of incommensurability and paradigm shifts. Here I use some of that vocabulary (and also that of Sellars) to elucidate what Stebbing is getting at. But the first thing to note is that analytic clarification is the *effect* of scientific development. The clarity achieved is the product of the growth in science. ("Einstein has made us see...") 'Analytic clarification of a concept' may be in the running for the worst philosophical coinage for failure to convey what it is trying to describe!

Despite Ayer's claim that according to Stebbing it is Einstein's treatment of simultaneity that clarified the concept, in the quoted passage from Stebbing it is left a bit vague who does the clarification in

²⁷ Recall Beaney (2003) and Egerton (2021).

²⁸ Stebbing (1933), op. cit. p. 30.

²⁹ On Stebbing's views on the paradox of analysis, see Janssen-Lauret (2022), op. cit. p. 61.

³⁰ Ayer (1936), op. cit., p. 58. One of the eye-opening claims in Frederique Janssen-Lauret's *recent Cambridge Elements* on Susan Stebbing is that "much of Stebbing's published work focussed on the philosophy of physics and especially on the philosophy of physics." (Frederique Janssen-Lauret (2022) *Susan Stebbing: Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 32.) This alerted me to the significance of the passage to be discussed.

³¹ Stebbing (1933) op. cit., p. 30.

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analytic clarification (notice the repeated use of 'we'/'us'). As recent scholarship on Stebbing has noted, in her philosophy of science Stebbing tends to treat science as a social, situated activity.³² As she puts it a few years later, "Science is the work of scientists, who, profiting by each other's labours, come gradually to achieve an agreed body of knowledge, and in the course of this achievement continually develop new and more powerful technical methods" (*Philosophy and the Physicists*)³³ So, I read her as claiming that Einstein triggered a social process of analytic clarification of concepts that had previously been taken for granted in science *and* ordinary life.

On Stebbing's view analytic clarification does not merely impact the scientific image, it is also induces shifts in the manifest image.³⁴ It's not just physicists who learned something new through the development of general relativity about the significance of simultaneity, all of us did. This is how I read her claim that "Before Einstein had asked the question how we determine whether two events are simultaneous, we thought we knew quite well what was meant by saying 'happening at the same time in London and New York'." (emphasis added.) The 'we' here in the example is the manifest image.

As an aside, the impact of science on the manifest image is itself due to what we may call, echoing Max Weber, a wider rationalization of the world. Since the rise of modernity many elements of the manifest image have already been infiltrated and shaped by the scientific image. This means that common sense itself can shift like quicksand.³⁵

Now, when I first read the quoted passage (with Kuhn and Quine in the back of my mind),³⁶ I thought that the lack of 'tidiness' of analytic clarification was due to a kind of semantic holism of concepts, that the significance of each concept was determined by adjoining concepts in a network. So that the adjustments that are required when we figure out what simultaneity really means ramifies out to other, adjoining concepts (like identity and place). But Stebbing does not explicitly commit to such holism in the context of analytic clarification.

Rather, the lack of tidiness is on her account due to the fact that the concepts involved are central to the scientific *and* manifest image(s). So that that the clarity gained from analytic clarification about the significance of clarified terms has to be fitted to quite a few claims (recall her, "the significance of *all* statements in which the concept occurs" emphasis added). This still involves a holist-friendly thought that the full, changed significance is not evident from a particular use, but needs to be inferred from a whole range of potentially subtly different uses (but this holism is more pragmatic than semantic).

I also suspect that part of the lack of tidiness is also due to Stebbing's recognition that science itself is open-ended, perhaps intrinsically so, and that it may discover new uses for the concepts in new statements (predictions, extensions, etc.) or through the new use of technology (recall the passage quoted from *Philosophy and the Physicists* above). The clarity gained here need not be a second

³² See Janssen-Lauret (2022), op. cit., p. 33ff.

³³ Susan Stebbing *Philosophy and the Physicists*. London: Dover Books, 1958 [1937], p. 69. The passage is quoted by Peter West "L. Susan Stebbing Philosophy and the Physicists (1937): a re-appraisal." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30.5 (2022): 868 and Silke Körber "Thinking About the "Common Reader:" Otto Neurath, L. Susan Stebbing and the (Modern) Picture-Text Style." *Neurath Reconsidered: New Sources and Perspectives* edited Jordi Cat & Adam Tamas Tuboly, Springer (2019): 456.

³⁴ On my reading, Stebbing's thinks Eddington's mistake was not that he thought science could shape the manifest image, but rather that he conflated the scientific and manifest images in places where they are better kept separate.

³⁵ I suspect that Stebbing's sensitivity to this is one of her more important differences with Moore. See also Janssen-Lauret (2022), op. cit., p. 36 & p. 52.

³⁶ Janssen-Lauret (2022), op. cit., p. 52, situates Stebbing as a transitional figure toward Quine's holism.

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order property of any particular individual, who individually may not know of "all statements in which the concept occurs", but can be *distributed* throughout a community even and (this may go beyond Stebbing's own actual commitments) come to be embedded in material objects of technology.

Stebbing's views here foreshadow Quine's views in certain respects. Quine had a tendency, as Greg Frost-Arnold has shown, (i) to associate clarity with more general forms of intelligibility. In later years, Quine might argue that (ii) his program (developed in *Word & Object*) of the philosopher regimenting scientific language to exhibit its ontological commitments, may also be aiming at a species of clarity (about the 'ontology' of science), alongside systematicity.³⁷ He also (iii) came to think of clarity as a more epistemic (not semantic) virtue of an intellectual system.³⁸

Be that as it may, in the quoted passage, Stebbing resists the temptation to claim that once successful scientific paradigms were simply false; that what we once thought was true was actually false. Rather, she suggests that one can say true things without fully understanding the concepts one uses: "This happens when we understand to some extent what we are saying but do not understand clearly exactly what we are saying." This particular vantage point is extraordinary difficult to achieve about one's own (paradigmatic) utterances, but does become more easily available during and after what we now call a 'paradigm shift' (hence the significance of Einstein in the passage).

On the view I am attributing to Stebbing, part of the point of the later paradigm, of the growth of knowledge more generally, is to elucidate how we could speak truth before while strictly speaking not always understanding fully our own concepts.³⁹ Stebbing here alerts us to the role of philosophy, analytic clarification of concepts, *within* science during shifts of the research frontier. (Of course, this is not philosophy's only role.)⁴⁰

There is a wider lesson here about our lives in societies characterized by complex, cognitive division of labor and evolving knowledge. In the quoted passage, Newton represents the human condition in the following way: as through the growth of science and technology the concepts of the scientific image encroach on the manifest image, and as the division of labor within the sciences becomes ever more fine-grained, it is inevitable that at any given time we say true things without understanding the concepts we use even if we are genius level expert on the subject. Somewhat paradoxically then, the clarity that is the effect of analytic clarification grows while science and technology grows; but simultaneously [sic] their growth means that we often are in the dark about the truths we utter confidently.

There is, thus, lurking in Stebbing's philosophy a call for a kind of individual humility. In addition, the present section has highlighted Stebbing's alertness to the significance of clarification of specialist language (in the scientific image) to ordinary life (manifest image). Both of these themes link up importantly with her public facing, more political theorizing in *Thinking to Some Purpose* which I

³⁷ This second Quine-ian notion of clarity is anticipated by Price in the material discussed in a footnote in section 2 above.

³⁸ Greg Frost-Arnold *Carnap, Tarski, and Quine at Harvard: Conversations on logic, mathematics, and science*. Chicago IL.: Open Court, 2013, p. 46ff. What is especially pertinent for my present discussion is that Frost-Arnold shows that the leading figures of analytic philosophy of the age had trouble keeping epistemic and semantic notions of clarity distinct. Ayer, that is, was right to call attention to Stebbing's criticism of logical positivists' tendency to conflate different kinds of analysis.

³⁹ For a more rigorous exploration of ideas in this vicinity see Howard Stein "The enterprise of understanding and the enterprise of knowledge." *Synthese* 140.1-2 (2004), especially p. 164.

⁴⁰ My argument converges with Bryan Pickel's chapter "Stebbing on Linguistic Convention," in this volume, when he notes that for Stebbing "definitions may be discovered empirically."

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discuss in the final section. However, in order to situate the distinctness of Stebbing's discussion, I briefly discuss the role of clarity in some of her contemporaries.

4. Nagel and Carnap

In previous sections I have argued that the standard conception of clarity disguises considerable heterogeneity. I used Stebbing's account of Wittgenstein and her criticism of logical positivism to articulate this fact. In this section I briefly discuss two influential conceptions of clarity in order to prepare to show how distinctive her account in *Thinking to Some Purpose* is.

First, I discuss Carnapian clarity.⁴¹ In Howard Stein's influential presentation -- articulated in the context of the Quine-Carnap polemic -- the view of Carnap (ca 1951) is conveyed as follows:

Quine and I really differ, not concerning a matter of fact, nor any question with cognitive content, but rather in our respective estimates of the most fruitful course for science [sic] to follow. Quine is impressed by the continuity between scientific thought and that of daily life -- between scientific language and the language of ordinary discourse -- and sees no philosophical gain, no gain either in clarity or in fruitfulness, in the construction of distinct formalized languages for science. I concede the continuity, but...believe that very important gains in clarity and fruitfulness are to be had from the introduction of such formally constructed languages. This is a difference of opinion which, despite the fact that it does not concern (in my own terms) a matter with cognitive content, is nonetheless in principle susceptible of a kind of rational resolution. In my view, both programs - mine of formalized languages, Quine's of a more freeflowing and casual use of language - ought to be pursued; and I think that if Quine and I could live, say, for two hundred years, it would be possible at the end of that time for us to agree on which of the two programs had proved more successful.⁴²

In Stein's report, Carnap presents himself as the advocate of clarity achieved by the use of constructed languages or, as we would say, formal methods. Carnap explicitly treats clarity as distinct from the more consequentialist virtue of fruitfulness. So, while Carnap and his followers undoubtedly also believe that pursuing such clarity has (many) consequentialist pay-offs, there is an independent merit, and (to use Carnapian lingo), an external, optative value, to the pursuit of clarity. I understand this as a kind of aesthetic preference.

Carnapian clarity here is a property or by-product of formal systems, of constructed languages. Clarity in the hands of Carnap means to capture a kind of demand for transparency in one's inferential practices, one's commitments, and the use of terms. Again, there are all kinds of other (consequentialist) cognitive and epistemic benefits that are meant to follow from the pursuit of such clarity, but these are not primarily aesthetic.

I quoted the report on Carnap's exchange with Quine to note that he explicitly recognizes the viability and legitimacy of alternative projects *within* scientific philosophy broadly conceived. For,

⁴¹ I use 'Carnapian' rather than 'Carnap's' because I am not doing exegesis of Carnap's writings. I leave for another time the extent to which Carnap's account of explication can be thought to develop Stebbing's notion of analytic clarification.

⁴² Stein, Howard. "Was Carnap entirely wrong, after all?." *Synthese* (1992): 270. The approach is developed in Carus, André W. *Carnap and twentieth-century thought: Explication as enlightenment*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

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while, in principle, anybody can become a formal philosopher or use formal methods, these methods also create, in practice, barriers to intelligibility and understanding to those not in the know. That is, Carnapian clarity is, despite his socialist sympathies, really a second-order property of an otherwise esoteric, expert practice.

This point is explicit in a (1938) paper, "The Fight for Clarity," by Ernest Nagel that was intended to partially (re-)introduce logical empiricism to an American audience, while simultaneously defending them from misrepresentation.⁴³ Nagel argues that the search for clarity is an effect or byproduct of the advanced development and specialization (and, thus, esotericism) of the special sciences. This means that new criteria of intelligibility distinct from those used in ordinary language are required. As he puts it, "the increased abstractness and generality of modern science require a serious reconsideration and a recasting of those relatively simple canons of intelligibility and validity which are sufficient for the needs of every-day discourse and inquiry."⁴⁴ So, at a first approximation, Nagel's version of clarity involve the canons of intelligibility and validity apt for special sciences.

In fact, Nagel puts a kind of neo-Kantian and proto-Foucaultian spin on the mature/more recent version of logical empiricism: "Indeed the proper question is not "what does a statement mean?" but "what are the conditions which empiricists will acknowledge to be necessary for a statement to have meaning?"⁴⁵

But the reason why this effort at clarification is a philosophical task is, in part, due to a limitation of the professional scientist within the cognitive division of labor: "most professional scientists are not sufficiently conscious of their own procedures to enlighten us; special studies must be undertaken by men [sic!] sensitive to the logical issues involved. Recent methodological studies aim to supply appropriate answers."⁴⁶

However, Nagel is also concerned with the role of clarity in democratic life. Not unlike Stebbing's account of analytic clarification, we see here (Nagel returns to it later in the essay) the germ of Thomas Kuhn's idea that there is a sense in which ordinary scientists may lack proper self-awareness about their own practices. We might say that a lot of scientific activity (calibration, measurement practices, hidden assumption in the math) is 'black-boxed' and 'taken off-line,' say in the name of cognitive and operational efficiency. To be sure, Nagel is quick to emphasize (and nods to Mach's influence) that interest in the process of clarification, so not just the results, is widespread among "professional scientists."⁴⁷ So, it would be more apt to say that for Nagel clarification is not just developing the canons of intelligibility and validity apt for (esoteric) special sciences, but also making transparent the methods and practices of science that generate warranted claims to the scientists themselves.

Nagel seems to mean by 'intelligibility' something like showing how and the way terms/concepts (etc.) hang together (he's a holist) and function in a system of knowledge and bodies of ordinary practice. At least this is suggested by remarks like the following, "the task of philosophy lies in the clarification of terms occurring in scientific *and everyday discourse*, by exhibiting their interrelations and function in the contexts in which they occur." (emphases added)⁴⁸

⁴³ I thank Ádám Tuboly for alerting me to the significance of this paper.

⁴⁴ Ernest Nagel "The Fight for Clarity: Logical Empiricism." *The American Scholar*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1938: 47-48.

⁴⁵ Nagel (1938), op. cit., p. 51.

⁴⁶ Nagel (1938), op. cit., p. 48.

⁴⁷ Nagel (1938), op. cit., p. 47 & 58.

⁴⁸ Nagel (1938), op. cit., p. 59.

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So, finally, Nagel clarification is not just developing the canons of intelligibility and validity apt for (esoteric) special sciences, but also making transparent the methods and practices of science that generate warranted claims in part by showing how and the way terms/concepts hang together and function in a system of knowledge *and* forms of ordinary practice. Now, one may think that Nagel here echoes a kind of '(Lockean) under-laborer to the sciences' conception of philosophy. However, he also endorses some of the political aims for clarification by "some" logical empiricists:

One of [logical empiricism's] functions, that of serving as a disinfectant to the thinking of men, would alone justify the continuance and spread of the movement. It rests its case not on an appeal to authority or the emotional needs of men but on an appeal to a persistent effort to think clearly. The movement is an important arm in the interminable warfare against obscurantism and for clarity.⁴⁹

For Nagel government by discussion is not about achieving authoritative consensus, but rather, as his conception of science and democracy reveal, as the ongoing practice of being responsive to reasons and criticisms based on experimentally controlled facts.⁵⁰ Our cognitive practices in science and political life are made possible, and developed and improved by, our socially embedded interactions with each other. For Nagel it is clear that "Perhaps no intellectual tendency is more dangerous than that accompanying the claim that knowledge of human affairs is the exclusive property of men endowed with a "higher insight" - which is not subject to the control of well established experimental methods."⁵¹ The point is not just the egalitarian ideal that anyone can become a scientist, but also for Nagel the cultivation of clarity in the sciences is a contribution to a properly democratic ethos.⁵²

5. Stebbing on democratic clarity

Stebbing's *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939) was written for a wide audience (it appeared in the Pelican imprint). The official topic of the book is announced in the prologue:

I am convinced of the urgent need for a democratic people to think clearly without the distortions due to unconscious bias and unrecognized ignorance. Our failures in thinking are in part due to faults which we could to some extent overcome were we to see clearly how these faults arise. It is the aim of this book to make a small effort in this direction.--Preface to the 1939 edition⁵³

It's worth noting that 'clear' and its cognates are used repeatedly through the book. Clarity here is a property of thought and perception. In what follows, I often use 'cognition' as shorthand for both. Clarity seems to be a necessary condition for success at thinking (and action guided by it). In particular, clarity is, as the quoted preface makes clear, the absence of distortions in thought and perception caused by bias and ignorance one is not aware of. *Undistorted thought* is what's being aimed at in describing something as 'clear.' But the suggestion is that known biases and awareness

⁴⁹ Nagel (1938), op. cit., p. 59. This echoes the kind of language we find in Nagel 1936a & 1936b, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Schliesser, Eric. "Philosophy of science as first philosophy: the liberal polemics of Ernest Nagel." *Ernest Nagel: Philosophy of Science and the Fight for Clarity* (2022): 233-253.

⁵¹ Nagel (1938), op. cit. 55.

⁵² See Schliesser (2022), op. cit.

⁵³ All my quotes/page-numbers are from the 2022 Routledge reprint with an introduction by Peter West and a foreword by Nigel Warburton. See pp. xxix-xxx.

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of ignorance are not an obstacle to successful thought presumably because they can knowingly be controlled for. Crucially, clear cognition is a key ingredient for intelligence on Stebbing's view.⁵⁴

Stebbing's interest in unconscious bias is prompted by the significance of political propaganda, demagoguery, and advertising (she groups these together as "rhetorical persuasion") and presumably also reflects the growing stature of Freudianism in the age. For Stebbing an important example of such unconscious bias are the "concealed contradictions," including racial biases, we acquire as members of a group.⁵⁵

Stebbing treats clarity as a property of thought and perception that is, in principle, widely diffused among ordinary people; she thinks we all have "some capacity to follow an argument."⁵⁶ In a footnote she adds she hopes its not unduly optimistic to assert this.⁵⁷ For Stebbing, clarity is necessary condition for success at thinking and action guided by it, or what she calls "effective thinking."⁵⁸ I call this position in which clarity is a capacity of ordinary people to think effectively, that is, without distortion, in ordinary life, 'democratic clarity.'

Now such democratic clarity is an achievement. Or to be precise, Stebbing treats it as a *skill* that can be acquired; one can be "trained to think clearly."⁵⁹ Such training makes "rational argument and... reasonable consideration" in democratic life possible.⁶⁰ *Thinking to Some Purpose's* role "as one of the first textbooks in critical thinking" is now well understood, but it is worth emphasizing it does so in the context of articulating a deliberative conception of democracy.⁶¹ This skill itself can, once acquired with "effort" also be something that we control; she emphasizes that have to "wish" to think clearly.⁶² Once the skill is acquired were are also capable of logically sound argument.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, teaching awareness and discovery of possible and kinds of fallacies play a prominent role throughout *Thinking to Some Purpose*.

It is worth emphasizing how distinctive Stebbing's account of democratic clarity is. Of the major early analytic philosophers, Stebbing is the *only* one who really thought that clarity is achievable in ordinary life by ordinary people reasoning about things. Again, while I don't want to exaggerate the differences between Nagel and Stebbing —they share in fact a pragmatist sensibility, and agree on the significance of proportioning belief to evidence and the important focus of the way we do things with reasonings --, it's important to see the contrasting notions of clarity at work here. In Nagel, clarity is something we do with specialist language and practices that, amongst other functions, can shape and diagnose features in ordinary life, whereas for Stebbing clarity can be immanent in and part and parcel of ordinary life. Not to put too fine a point on it, Nagel, Carnap, and Quine all share in the idea that there is *some* salient contrast between formal and specialist, regimented languages,

⁵⁴ Stebbing 2022, op. cit, 22.

⁵⁵ Stebbing 2022, op. cit, 22.

⁵⁶ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 21.

⁵⁷ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁸ Stebbing (1939), op cit. 5.

⁵⁹ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p 4. For an excellent account of how Stebbing conceives of it as a skill, see Bryan Pickel "Susan Stebbing's Intellectualism." *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 10.4 (2022): p. 8ff.

⁶⁰ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p 4; see also p. 79ff, where she introduces the technical term 'convince' when she is describing *public* rational argument.

⁶¹ The quote is from Dutilh Novaes, Catarina, "Argument and Argumentation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/argument/>. Dutilh Novaes treats deliberative democracy as resting on consensus-oriented approaches.

⁶² Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 29 & p. 6

⁶³ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 6.

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on one hand, and ordinary speech, on the other. (How that contrast is characterized and to what degree it is merely a distinction in degree is famously a matter of substantive disagreement among Quine and Carnap.) For most of these philosophers, clarity is not to be found on the side of ordinary talk. Stebbing is the outlier in thinking that clarity is not so restricted, but available, in principle, to us all in ordinary life.

So far, I have treated Stebbing take on democratic clarity as *instrumental* to her account of deliberative democracy. But that's not wholly her own view. Stebbing takes

for granted that to be clear-headed is worth while for its own sake. Without this assumption I should not have wanted to write this book. It is, however, enough if you will admit that muddled thinking ends in bungled doing, so that to think clearly is useful for the sake of achieving even our most practical aims. Unless you admit at least as much as this, there will be no point, so far as you are concerned, in what I have to say. Our points of view would be too different for discussion to be possible.⁶⁴

So, democratic clarity is not just treated as an instrumental value to democratic deliberative life. Rather, Stebbing values it as a private and presumably highly intellectual virtue or end in itself. (There are shades of Spinoza here and I return to that below.) Fair enough.

It is a bit peculiar that she thinks her imagined interlocuter or reader must share in the commitment that "to think clearly is useful for the sake of achieving even our most practical aims." Admittedly, it seems odd for anyone to deny this in the most general sense. But it is not wholly unreasonable for such an interlocuter to also claim that clarity of cognition may often (perhaps always) be unnecessary to achieve our most practical aims (because relying on tradition, faith, instinct, testimony, or expertise/authority of others). And perhaps (one may say, echoing Hume or Nietzsche,) it's our biases (or overconfidence) that help us acquire our most fundamental, practical aims (which are always constrained by time and other resource scarcities). The problem here is not the purported role of democratic clarity in achieving our aims, but in Stebbing's insistence that muddled thinking must lead to muddled doing. This claim has not been established. It's hard to see how it could be established given how much has been achieved in conditions of ignorance and superstition.⁶⁵

So, what's odd is that in order to have discussion at all, Stebbing assumes assent on this very point of contention. And the reason it is odd is that in a democratic society we cannot assume or stipulate agreement over such questions or ways of life including those that, to put it exaggeratedly, resist the clarion call of Enlightenment. My point here is not that one cannot help others see how useful democratic clarity might be (Stebbing is wonderfully persuasive on this score), but rather her insistence that democratic clarity must be the common ground rather than the *potential effect* of discussion.

As I noted, there is a whiff of Spinozism in her treatment of clarity. We know she was familiar with Spinoza's system, which she discusses, in passing in her famous essay (1932) "The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics." She deliberately evokes the last sentence of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the last sentence of the "epilogue" of *Thinking to some Purpose*:

My point of view with regard to this topic can be summed up in the statement: He alone is capable of being tolerant whose conclusions have been thought out and are recognized to be inconsistent

⁶⁴ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 34.

⁶⁵ It's also at odds with her own example of analytic clarification of concepts.

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with the beliefs of other persons. To be tolerant is not to be indifferent, and is incompatible with ignorance. My conclusions have been reasonably attained in so far as I have been able to discount my prejudices, to allow for the distorting effects of your prejudices, to collect the relevant evidence and to weigh that evidence in accordance with logical principles. The extent to which I can achieve these aims is the measure of my freedom of mind. To be thus free is as difficult as it is rare.⁶⁶

To avoid confusion, in the quoted paragraph, 'logical principles,' include deductive and inductive logic. Be that as it may, clarity, then, is a means toward freedom of mind, but also its measure. Democratic clarity clearly comes in degrees for Stebbing.

Now 'freedom' is not introduced until the epilogue of *Thinking to some Purpose*. I quote the key paragraph to give a flavor of Stebbing's use of it:

I believe also that similar strictures could be truly made with regard to polls held recently in Germany and in Austria. Elections in this country are not in this sense unfree. We are proud to consider ourselves a democracy; we claim to have freedom of election, freedom of speech (including freedom of the Press) limited only by the laws of libel, sedition and blasphemy, and freedom in religion. No doubt there are certain qualifications to be made; it is probable that most people would admit that without economic freedom there cannot be political freedom, and that lacking economic security no man can be regarded as economically free. But, even if these admissions be granted, it will be contended that, by and large, we in this country do have institutions that may properly be described as democratic. It is not to my purpose to dispute these contentions. Nor shall I attempt to determine what characteristics are essential to democracy. It is enough if it be granted that it lies in our national temper to dislike obvious governmental restrictions. We like to feel ourselves to be free. In short, we value civil liberties.⁶⁷

Here 'freedom' means something like the 'means conducive toward democratic life,' including economic, political, and civil means. So, one might think that by a 'free mind,' Stebbing also means 'the mental state conducive, at least in part, toward a democratic life.' This is what she does mean (as I show in the next paragraph.) But, somewhat confusingly, Stebbing goes on to write, "I deliberately omit, however, any discussion of such political obstacles to freedom as we may encounter. I am not concerned with politics. My topic is freedom of mind. Unless I can think freely I cannot think effectively."⁶⁸ And so one might think that in so far as a 'free mind' has nothing to do with politics -- and democratic life is of political significance -- that by a 'free mind' Stebbing means something *essentially* private.

But that would not be right conclusion, because she immediately goes on to write, "Here 'I' stands for any person. If I want to make up my mind upon any problem of political action, I must be able to deliberate freely. If it were in fact true that we were all politically and economically free, still it would not follow that we were possessed of the freedom of mind without which, in my opinion, no democratic institutions can be satisfactorily maintained."⁶⁹ So, by 'politics' on the same page, Stebbing means not 'pertaining to political life,' but rather something like, 'subject to existing political controversy' (in the sense of what policy or political measure to support.)⁷⁰ For, by a 'free mind' Stebbing clearly means a key to, or an effective ingredient that makes public deliberation

⁶⁶ Stebbing (1939), op. cit. p. 256.

⁶⁷ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 249

⁶⁸ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 250.

⁶⁹ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 250.

⁷⁰ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 254.

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possible and so is conducive to democratic institutions, that is, political life in the wider institutional or existential sense (but not in the humdrum sense of a 'subject of political controversy').

So, fundamentally, on Stebbing's view democratic clarity is a skill conducive to the kinds of agency involved in public deliberation of a sort that maintains democratic institutions or democratic way of life. And by 'democracy' Stebbing means a participatory one that is exercised in voting but also (as her examples throughout the book make clear) in the formation of public opinion of the sort familiar from British parliamentary democracy. As she puts it 'democratic government' is more than just "the consent of the governed," -- this she thinks is actual in British political life -- but rather it means that "the voice of the people prevails."⁷¹ However, she denies that the latter kind of democratic society exists as of yet because under then current (and present) conditions the British populace *lacks* freedom of mind.

Now, as Stebbing notes, her book has emphasized obstacles to such freedom: "the difficulty of freeing our minds from blinkers, the difficulty of resisting propaganda and of being content to be persuaded where we should have striven to be convinced, the difficulties of an audience dominated by an unscrupulous speaker and the difficulties of a speaker who has to address an audience that is lazy and uncritical – in short, the difficulties created by our stupidity and by those who take advantage of that stupidity." But in the epilogue she focuses on "the difficulty of obtaining information – the difficulty of knowing how to discover reliable testimony."⁷² By this she means, in particular, the way the press shapes access to information.

In light of the concentrated ownership of the press, and its interests in withholding or shaping such information, and in light of many examples of partial or biased reporting that Stebbing discusses, Stebbing concludes:

I am forced to say this; if my belief in the reliability of the testimony is false, then I am not free to decide. If such information as I have is not to be trusted, then I lack freedom of decision. For this reason, those who control the Press have power to control our minds with regard to our thinking about 'all public transactions'. A controlled Press is an obstacle to democracy, an obstacle that is the more dangerous in proportion as we are unaware of our lack of freedom.⁷³

The implication being that the British public *seems* to think that they have free minds, but in reality - - because they do not reflect on the conditions that shape their access to the information salient to public life and do not seem perturbed by their controlled press -- they do not. They "acquiesce" in rule by a narrow elite, "the ruling class," whose decisions "control us."⁷⁴ Empirically, Stebbing echoes, thus, the sociological thesis that one can have elite rule even in a functioning parliamentary democracies.⁷⁵ Unlike the Italian elite school, she deplores this situation.

Now, it is natural to read *Thinking to Some Purpose*, and come away thinking that to think clearly and to become free requires a lot of very time-consuming individual effort at self-betterment. One can certainly cite passages to that effect: "I do seek to convince the reader that it is of great practical importance that we ordinary men and women should think clearly, that there are many obstacles to thinking clearly, and that some of these obstacles can be overcome provided that we wish to

⁷¹ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 254.

⁷² Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 250.

⁷³ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 253.

⁷⁴ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 254.

⁷⁵ James Burnham (1943) *The Machiavellians*, New York: The John Day for an influential statement an analysis of Mosca, Pareto, and Michels.

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overcome them and are willing to make an effort to do so."⁷⁶ She closes the book with the admonition that "I...would maintain that it is desirable that we should develop in ourselves a habit of sceptical inquiry."⁷⁷ These are passages where Stebbing, thus, anticipates Arendt's (republican) conception of democratic life.

But as the book unfolds and reaches its crescendo in the epilogue, it is obvious that Stebbing also thinks that there are many structural obstacles to removing all such impediments to clear thinking. Even if one grants that Stebbing's rhetoric is designed as a kind of call to action (say to break up the ruling class monopoly on ownership of the popular press), somewhat disappointingly, she does not offer a program of how those obstacles can be removed while not undermining the possibility of a democratic life in the deliberative and self-governing sense she advocates.

In fact, it is also not entirely clear on Stebbing's account what to make of a people that does not seem to wish to be free in Stebbing's sense, as she implies of the English: "The vast majority of English people want to be governed peaceably, and want to be free to pursue their own unpolitical interests."⁷⁸ Even if one agrees with Stebbing's diagnoses, the English public need not be irrational here. For it is, in fact, on her account very hard work to be free in the sense she advocates, and as the concluding paragraph quoted above suggests, she is explicitly aware of this. In addition, given the obstacles to such freedom she diagnoses, it also seems rather fruitless and (ought implies can) not required or unnecessary to be free in the political or democratic sense advocated by Stebbing. To be sure, for many unpolitical pursuits such freedom, clear thought, will be necessary for effective action and within reach. So, I am not suggesting that democratic clarity should be avoided even if it is not very useful in existing political life.

Given the many economic and educational preconditions required and the demands on our time and attention that a life of thinking clearly requires on Stebbing's account, it is a bit surprising that she does not explore the psychological, collective, or institutional means required to organize our lives in complex epistemic and political environments. For example, without wishing to defend the English or its ruling class (then or now), but if it's true that its "ruling class, [is] educated for political purposes, trained from birth to undertake the responsibilities of ruling"⁷⁹ then this does represent (one might say echoing Schumpeter or Oakeshott) a possible, even rational response to the structural impediments to creating a mass society of free minds in the political sense Stebbing diagnoses (even if it is also a contributing cause to maintaining such political tutelage).

In fact, Stebbing clearly thinks that attachment to a political party is a contributing source of bias and so of not thinking clearly.⁸⁰ Throughout *Thinking to Some Purpose*, she often uses politicians of as examples to illustrate biased thinking.⁸¹ By varying these examples she tries to be even-handed and entice her readers to discern the structural obstacle(s) to clear thinking she diagnoses.

It does not seem to occur to Stebbing, however, that part of the epistemic or cognitive function of parties may well be to provide useful signals or cues in complex social and political environments for

⁷⁶ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 29.

⁷⁷ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 255.

⁷⁸ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 254. (This echoes Lippmann's (1922) diagnosis of the (American) democratic public in *Public Opinion*.) Stebbing ignores colonial and colonized populations.

⁷⁹ Stebbing (1939), op. cit., p. 254.

⁸⁰ This is especially clear in chapter 8, see p. 98ff on party attachment. This anticipates a lot of handwringing about partisan polarization today.

⁸¹ Cf. Anscombe's judgment on Stebbing in "Mr. Truman's Degree" reprinted in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. III, *Ethics, Religion and Politics*. Blackwell, Oxford: 1981, p. 66.

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cognitively overburdened or agents without sufficient interest in political life.⁸² One may well think that one of liberal democracy's fruits is that such a lack of interest in active political life need not be irrational. So, because Stebbing treats democratic clarity as a property of individual minds who must almost possess the virtues of a Spinozistic sage (and inevitably fall short), she misses how in the division of (cognitive and economic) labor, we might well have strategies or heuristics that allow individuals to remain in partial darkness while being part of collectives that can act with sufficient enough effectiveness.⁸³

⁸² This truism of political science, is given a philosophical treatment in Neil Levy (2021) *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸³ One may well see the exact contemporary, Lippmann's (1938) *The Good Society*, as developing this strategy, and laying the groundwork for a research and political program for handling the problems diagnosed by Stebbing. See Schliesser, Eric. "Walter Lippmann: The prophet of liberalism and the road not taken." *Journal of Contextual Economics–Schmollers Jahrbuch* 139.2-4 (2019): 349-364.