

Susan Stebbing and the Truthmaker Approach to Metaphysics

Abstract

Susan Stebbing's reflections on method in metaphysics are deserving of sustained attention by historians of analytic philosophy, not least because her work was for some time unduly sidelined. In this paper I build on recent reassessments of Stebbing's work to argue that she can fruitfully be seen as attempting in the mid-1930s to articulate a precursor to the Truthmaker Approach in metaphysics – doing so departs from Janssen-Lauret's account of Stebbing as a stepping-stone to later Quinean holism while still recognising that she was not simply a proponent of a Moorean–Russellian position. This different perspective reveals (i) the emergence of a difference in metametaphysical approaches at an earlier stage than is typically thought and (ii) a difference between ways of critiquing the logical positivist project which would otherwise be difficult to see.

Keywords: Susan Stebbing · Metametaphysics · Truthmakers · Quinean Approach

1 Stebbing reconsidered

Susan Stebbing's insightful philosophical work, in particular her effort to reflect on philosophical method in light of the challenges posed by logical positivism, is deserving of sustained attention by historians of analytic philosophy. This is not just because her work was unduly sidelined in the years after it was written, but also because it contains distinctive observations about the assumptions underlying approaches of the time. Fortunately more recent treatments have started to uncover insights about the place of Stebbing's work in the development of analytic philosophy. We will begin our own examination by recapping part of Stebbing's views, then exploring more recent discussions of Stebbing and laying out the tension that they leave us with, laying down the groundwork for the central discussion.

1.1 Stebbing on approaches and methods

Here we are primarily concerned with Stebbing's work during a short period in which she explored some ideas about the methods of metaphysics that had not been unpicked by her contemporaries (Stebbing 1932; 1933*a*; *b*; 1934). During this period Stebbing's chief concern was *analysis*; later her focus would turn to more public-facing topics (notably her 1937, on the confusions fostered by careless popular science, and her 1939*b* on attempting to help the public to think 'to some purpose'). She would also later express dissatisfaction with her previous ideas, saying she had rejected some of the relevant assumptions and was 'tired of the topic' of analysis (Stebbing 1939*a*, 71), but first, the earlier perspective is clear enough to be worth examining even if we suppose Stebbing's backtracking to be wholehearted, and second, Stebbing was prone to excessive self-criticism, with a 'tendency to criticise her own previous work for being 'muddled' or 'confused'...but not to offer an alternative' (Chapman 2013, 87), which suggests that her harshness may sometimes come from frustrated perfectionism.¹

A widespread view of Stebbing during and after her life saw her as a 'disciple of Moore' (Ayer 1977, quoted in Beaney 2016), and indeed there is at least some justification for this, though as recent scholarship has already shown (Beaney 2003; 2016, Chapman 2013, Janssen-Lauret 2017, Douglas and Nassim 2021) it is a serious oversimplification. Stebbing consistently emphasises the importance of Moore's ideas, which can create the impression that she is a mere apologist for the British analytic tradition, or perhaps for Moore in particular. But this does not appreciate Stebbing's careful critical attention to philosophical approaches; she recognises the importance of examining the assumptions underlying the way we do philosophy separately from the theory at which we arrive. To help articulate Stebbing's approach more fully, let us begin by outlining her classification of methods.

Deductive metaphysics

The first key approach for understanding Stebbing's perspective is what she calls 'deductive metaphysics', whose commitments will serve as the cautionary tale for the methods to follow. Stebbing sees deductive metaphysics as having furnished important insights historically, but argues that we are forced to leave it behind in pursuit of understanding. She identifies Descartes, Spinoza and most recently McTaggart as pursuing deductive metaphysics in different ways, but always sharing the central idea that the project of metaphysics is to begin from certain fundamental axioms concerning the world's nature and to

¹Indeed an examination of the critical statements in her 1939*b* suggests that her reservations relate more to features of John Wisdom's conception of analysis than to her own.

find what follows from these. The idea seems to be that we can identify a fundamental nature to reality which provides an absolute criterion separating the real from the merely apparent – whatever cannot be shown to follow from the fundamental base is branded as spurious.

Stebbing's central criticism of deductive metaphysics is that it produces theories in which we cannot hope to have confidence, and here Moorean ideology makes its first appearance. Whatever fundamental principles we fashion our metaphysics from, they cannot be better justified than the common-sense beliefs with which we begin, so we will be left struggling for an explanation of how something approaching our beliefs follows from the principles, and giving a weaker version of those initial beliefs. Worse still, if any common-sense belief fails to make the grade, we will be forced to abandon it, ignoring the grounds we originally had, effectively *eroding* our justifications and threatening our knowledge. Stebbing offers a mild concession by saying that deductive metaphysics may work if it instead seeks to 'expound a *vision*'² 1932, 70, but it is doubtful how comforting this would be to deductive metaphysicians – the remaining merit is perhaps that deductive metaphysics might show that some account is a *possible* description of the world, but deductive metaphysics seems always to aim for more than this.

Stebbing's rejection of deductive metaphysics leads into her view about the remaining prospects for metaphysics – and she needs to offer this since she makes a point of saying that 'in my opinion metaphysics is a distinctive branch of philosophy' (Stebbing 1932, 65). At this point the connections to movements of the time become clearer, because Stebbing sees a more promising avenue in the group of approaches that focus on *analysis*. However things are not so simple: Stebbing identifies multiple related kinds of analysis, each involving different assumptions and with different prospects. The overview below reconstructs Stebbing's account, subject to some simplification and interpretation where her views either evolved or were not entirely explicit.

Four kinds of analysis

First, Stebbing offers *analytic definition*: this method's goal is simply to clarify the meaning of a term. Stebbing takes Russell's analysis of definite descriptions to be paradigmatic of the method, and Stebbing's criteria are that *B* is an analytic definition of *A* when (i) *B* says what *A* says, (ii) *B* refers 'not less distinctly' (1933b, 29) to anything *A* refers to and (iii) *B* contains symbols not contained in *A*.

²The emphasis here is in the original: Stebbing used italics liberally, so henceforth I will mark only those cases where the emphasis is added.

Second comes *analytic clarification*. This appears to aim at much the same as analytic definition, but allows for some departure from usage on the assumption that there is a shortfall or inaccuracy in how we use the term. We might say that *B* is an analytic clarification of *A* when (i) *B* says (roughly) what *A* says, (ii) *A* is sometimes used to refer to some entity and (iii) *B* does not refer to that entity. Stebbing speaks in fact of the analytic clarification of *concepts*, citing concepts like *mass* or *simultaneity* as examples (1933b, 30), seemingly to avoid ‘subject-changing’ concerns given the inevitable differences in meaning.

Third, Stebbing offers *postulational analysis* (‘symbolic analysis’ in her 1932). This method aims to construct³ a formal or ‘postulational’ system through which a term or concept can be clarified, so we might express it thus: *B* is a postulational analysis of *A* when (i) *A* belongs to ordinary language and *B* to a ‘postulational system’ and (ii) *B* bears relations to expressions in its system similar to those *A* bears to other ordinary language expressions.

Fourth, and finally, Stebbing puts forward *directional analysis*. This method aims at identifying what some *fact* is based on, moving toward a ‘lower level’ – hence ‘directional’. We can put it like this: *B* is a directional analysis of *A* when (i) *B* refers to the same basic fact as *A* but (ii) *B* refers to that fact more directly than does *A*. (For now we will retain a surface view, but we will further explore these features in §2.)

Comparing the kinds

Stebbing does not just lay out this fourfold categorisation of analysis: she has views about where each kind is found, and their relative merits. As mentioned, she identifies analytic definition in Russell’s (1905) work on descriptions, but the implication of her discussion of the method seems to be that it is endorsed by all within the still-emerging tradition of analytic philosophy, since all of them accept that we might expose an expression’s meaning through such analysis. However analytic definition alone furnishes little of metaphysical significance, since it attempts to leave undisturbed the significance of what we say and is thus suited only to cases where grammar leaves us prone to confusions that dissipate upon recognising a sentence’s form.⁴ Analytic clarification sits in something of a limbo between methods, but it occupies a similar space to analytic definition

³There is certainly a connection between this method and the ‘constructions’ with which Stebbing deals in her 1933a; it is this which Stebbing seems to have in mind when criticising Russell’s view of ‘construction’ as ‘a synonym for “fiction”’ (1933a, 5).

⁴This is of course not to suggest that Russell’s contribution was the last word – an extensive literature arose claiming Russell’s theory to be either incorrect or incomplete. However (i) this doesn’t rule out Stebbing seeing it as a case of successful analytic definition, and (ii) viewing Russell’s analysis as incomplete would be consistent with viewing it as a partially successful analytic definition.

except where clear empirical or conceptual developments have changed our perspective, weakening our respect for ordinary usage. Our talk of simultaneity, for instance, has been affected by the recognition of relativity, after which we arguably mean something different by ‘simultaneous’.

The first big divide in Stebbing’s categorisation comes with postulational analysis: this method Stebbing takes to be distinctive of logical positivism.⁵ Stebbing played an under-recognised role in introducing logical positivism to British philosophy – while Ayer (1936) is often credited with this, in part due to the stridency of *Language, Truth and Logic*, in the early 1930s Stebbing was already inviting Vienna Circle figures to speak and debating them. These interactions inspired much of her work at this time, which was critical but admiring of the approach (the history and interactions, including those between Stebbing and Ayer, are laid out in Chapman 2013, ch. 5). As Stebbing presents it, postulational analysis is the logical positivists’ main concern – to create formal constructions that to some extent mirror ordinary usage while somehow improving on it. While postulational analysis is deductive in form, it lacks the absolute character of deductive metaphysics, which is significant because Stebbing’s criticism of postulational analysis is different from that of deductive metaphysics: she thinks that postulational analysis is problematically *abstract*. We will consider this criticism in more detail in §3.

Thus far we have been encouraged to accept analytic definition and clarification as part of understanding our language and its implications, but to be cautious about postulational analysis – yet Stebbing thinks that’s not the end of it. Stebbing’s final category, directional analysis, aims to uncover lower layers of reality. Importantly, though, this method also avoids the sparse reality promised by deductive metaphysics: Stebbing wants to say that ‘in a sense, the metaphysician is not concerned to discover any *new facts*’ (1932, 65), and certainly not facts that displace the old. How can Stebbing claim that we can seek insight without upending our ordinary theory? We will look further into this in §2.3, but the reason is that directional analysis aims toward *basic facts*.

Especially given her identification of *Principia Mathematica* as a project of directional analysis (see n. 3 above), there is a strong temptation to see Stebbing’s work here as defending a Moore-Russell axis of analytic philosophy in opposition to logical positivism. Similarly, it is tempting to see Stebbing as defending *reduction* as the goal of metaphysics, given the move toward the establishment

⁵Stebbing’s remarks in her 1933a also suggest that she sees both Russell and Eddington as practising postulational analysis when offering ‘constructions’ (see esp. 6). However Russell’s case is more complex since alongside this and analytic definition, a substantial part of his work (namely Russell and Whitehead 1910) is identified as directional analysis in Stebbing 1932, 90, and Stebbing (1937) makes it clear that she sees Eddington as so ‘muddled’ that her estimation of his views is only a best approximation.

of more basic facts through analysis. However, though there are good reasons for this view, shown not just in responses of the time⁶ but also in e.g. Beaney (2003, 348), there are also reasons to hesitate over this. We will examine one such reason next.

1.2 Janssen-Lauret's treatment of Stebbing

Frederique Janssen-Lauret (2017) examines Stebbing's account of metaphysical methods in light of her broader development, making use especially of Siobhan Chapman's (2013) detailed account, and finds reason to see her as departing substantially from the views of Russell and Moore. Noting that F. H. Bradley was a substantial influence on Stebbing in early work, until exposure to Moore shifted her orientation, Janssen-Lauret suggests that his ideas continue to exert an important influence on Stebbing's thought.

While clearly a key aspect of Moore's influence on Stebbing is his common-sense epistemology, which serves as one basis for Stebbing's rejection of deductive metaphysics, in certain respects Stebbing shows herself as being at some distance from Moore and Russell. Indeed she critiques Russell's approach both for his own view of constructions (1933*a*) and for the way this manifests in Carnap's work, whose application of Russell's version of Occam's Razor is portrayed as problematic for counselling us to prefer 'logical constructions' (1933*b*, 25). Furthermore, Stebbing pursues more wholeheartedly some upshots of Moore's epistemology – as Janssen-Lauret notes, Stebbing takes her exploration of methods seriously enough to raise problems not just for deductive metaphysics or logical positivism, but with directional analysis itself. She points out that

[w]hen we have made explicit what is entailed by directional analysis, we find we must make assumptions which so far from being certainly justified, are not even very plausible. (1932, 92)

Much of Stebbing's discussion of the approach simply says that the assumption of basic facts is required for it to work.

Furthermore Stebbing is 'far less sure than Russell and Moore were that we can be acquainted with, or single out by means of a logically proper name, the kind of thing which ordinary middle-sized objects are constructed out of' (Janssen-Lauret 2017, 14). This would be a natural endpoint for a reductive project, since acquaintance is intended to provide a base of certainty. If reduction were sought, we should expect this endpoint to be at least possible, but if it isn't, this suggests that Stebbing's project must be different.

⁶See Black 1933, Bronstein 1934.

Janssen-Lauret concludes on the basis of these complications that although Stebbing identifies key elements of the project of analysis, she does not fully commit to it, and her reservations open the way for the more holistic treatment of our theory that was to come with, among others, Quine. As well as meshing with Stebbing's aforementioned criticism of her account of analysis in her 1939*a*, and her continual criticisms of the prospect for giving 'logical constructions' that do service for ordinary notions, this paints Stebbing as retaining some of her commitment to Bradley's holism, helping to rehabilitate the view after its thorough repudiation by Russell and Moore. On Janssen-Lauret's picture, Stebbing recognises that we can retain some degree of holism without being drawn back to idealism.

1.3 A remaining tension

Janssen-Lauret notes some important complications in Stebbing's view, helping to demonstrate the limitations of seeing her as an apologist for Russell and Moore. However there remains a tension in understanding Stebbing's position.

While Stebbing's position certainly cannot be seen as a wholehearted endorsement of Russell's version of analytic philosophy, there remain uncomfortable uncertainties regarding her attitude. First we might suppose that the concerns Stebbing raises with basic facts are wholehearted, which would suggest a straightforward rejection of directional analysis. However Stebbing's negative comments about basic facts are not as strong, I think, as Janssen-Lauret's presentation suggests. Granted, Stebbing says in response to a critical note on her work that she

maintained that the method of analysis *as practised by certain philosophers* required the assumption that the analysis required the assumption that the analysis would terminate in basic facts, and that this assumption was not "certainly justified" and was not "even very plausible". (Stebbing 1934, 33–4)

This would add substantially to the case, except as Beaney (2003) notes it is hard not to see this statement as 'disingenuous' (347) since in her 1933*b* Stebbing devotes significant attention to arguing that she does see basic (or final) facts as 'important' (32) and that there is a 'need for [them]' (33). Even Stebbing's later, self-critical work focuses more on criticism of reduction and Wisdom's version of directional analysis as aiming to 'increase immediacy of knowledge, or acquaintance with the facts constituting successive stages in the analysis' (Wisdom 1934, 87), and Stebbing had for some time stressed that direct acquaintance was less important than Russell thought, calling it 'a mere blunder

to suppose that givenness must be direct' (1933*b*, 11). I think, then, that we must take seriously Stebbing's positive attitude toward basic facts.

We might then soften the conclusion and suggest that Stebbing is agnostic about basic facts – she recognises their attractiveness, but is aware of their limitations. This would have Stebbing in the role of a neutral articulator of approaches, but this too has difficulties. As noted above, Stebbing criticises the logical positivists' approach to analysis for its 'abstractness', and her comments suggest that she thinks her own position improves on the logical positivists'. Furthermore she appears to be convinced at least in the mid-1930s that analysis is how philosophy must proceed, and were Stebbing agnostic and merely laying out the features of different views, we would have to regard it as mysterious why she appears to see any account of analysis – Russell's, Moore's, the Vienna Circle's – as taking a step forward from deductive metaphysics. If, then, we can find a way to acknowledge both Stebbing's anti-foundational leanings and her appeal to basic facts, we will be able to more fully recognise the nuances of her view. This will be the goal of the remainder of the paper.

2 Turning to metametaphysics

The clearly methodological leanings of this part of Stebbing's work reveal an avenue for further investigation. Reflection on methodology in metaphysics is something that came to particular prominence with early 21st-century discussions of metametaphysics. Furthermore, the connections Janssen-Lauret draws to Quinean holism encourage a natural question, given that recent metametaphysics stems from critical reflection on Quine's ideas that began with van Inwagen 1998. Indeed it is a widespread view that 'the preferred methodology for answering [ontological] questions is... the type recommended by W. V. O. Quine' (Manley 2009, 3): so can Stebbing's view be seen as a forerunner of a Quinean Approach to metaphysics?

2.1 The Quinean Approach

The Quinean Approach of course takes certain of Quine's ideas as central, but extends far beyond Quine himself; versions of a Quinean approach have been articulated by, e.g., van Inwagen (1998; 2009), Jenkins (2010), Berto and Plebani (2015). According to the Quinean Approach, the task of metaphysics is to determine the ontological commitments of our best theory.⁷ The ontological commitments of a theory are, Quine claims, those entities over which the

⁷That is, the *core* task is this: it does not entirely exhaust the content of metaphysics for the Quinean Approach. One part that is often forgotten is the role of *ideology* (Quine 1951*a*; 1983), but this does not matter substantially for the current subject so can be left aside.

theory's sentences quantify – so if a theory contains, e.g., 'There are unicorns', 'Unicorns exist', or any other statement which can be reasonably translated as entailing ' $\exists x(x \text{ is a unicorn})$ ', that theory is committed to the values of those bound variables, i.e., to something to which the predicate 'is a unicorn' can be applied. The further question then arises of which theory we should accept – after all, a theory is just a collection of sentences, so all sorts of theories contain or entail ' $\exists x(x \text{ is a unicorn})$ '!

To resolve our embarrassment of theories we should accept our *best* theory, which is determined for the Quinean by our best science, broadly understood. Whatever we have the best reason to believe, taken as a whole and reconciled to ensure consistency/coherence, becomes our theory. The question then becomes 'Does the best formulation of our scientific efforts into a theory *have to* quantify over unicorns?', and the answer looks like a straightforward 'No,' though for other cases the answer is far less straightforward. One reason that things can become especially complex is that whether our best theory will contain certain terms depends on what other resources are available to us⁸ – everything in our ontology is a *posit*, which is proposed because it has (or purports to have) a theoretical role to play. If we subsequently find that something else can play that role while also fulfilling other roles or raising fewer difficult questions, we lose (some of) our reasons for endorsing that particular posit.

There is much more to be said about the Quinean Approach, especially regarding its elements which raise greater controversy. Firstly, there is perplexity in the relation between Quine's view itself and those 'Quinean' views which emerged in later years – concerns about this have been raised in, e.g., Price (2009), Egerton (2016). Furthermore there are reasons to think that due to the availability of alternative interpretations, *nothing* is absolutely required by our best theory, meaning there will always be indeterminacy of reference (see Quine 1968; for discussion of why Quine's doctrine of ontological relativity might render indeterminacy non-threatening, see Egerton 2020, §5). For now though we will bracket such concerns and stick with the basic picture, which has all we need for our current purposes.

2.2 The Truthmaker Approach

There are many ways to partition the territory of metaphysics, with key lines drawn in different places. In order to maintain focus, we will consider just one contrast that has the potential to be illuminating – between the Quinean Approach and the Truthmaker Approach.

⁸See, e.g., Quine's claim that classes become especially attractive once 'we find that they can be made to serve the purposes also of a great lot of further abstract objects' (1960b, 237).

For the Truthmaker Approach, being less tied to a particular thinker, there are fewer difficult questions about whether certain features should be excluded as idiosyncrasies, since the approach's shape can be discerned in the assumptions shared by several adherents. On the other hand the position can be mercurial, with it unclear who exactly we should include under its heading; some talk of 'making true' can make it unclear whether someone is

really deploying the concept of truth-making with which we are familiar rather than employing, perhaps for reasons of grammatical convenience, superficially similar turns of phrase. (MacBride 2020, Introduction)

We must therefore exercise caution.

For the Truthmaker Approach, the task of metaphysics is to identify the truthmakers for our true beliefs. While for some the notion of a truthmaker is intended as commonsense, it clearly requires motivation in this context since it carries the burden of an entire approach. An attempt at a characterisation is that 'a truthmaker for a particular truth... is just some existent, some portion of reality, in virtue of which that truth is true' (Armstrong 2004, 5), but it is possibly easier to clarify the idea by reference to examples. A useful approach is to start from intuitions of relevance – 'There are rings around Saturn' and 'There are coffee beans in my kitchen' are both true, but intuitively these truths have little to do with one another. Taking on Armstrong's terminology, a different *portion of reality* is involved in each, since it seems one could remove my coffee beans from the universe while leaving Saturn's rings unscathed, or vice versa.

It is not hard to accept that at least in some sense for each existent A , ' A exists' is made true by A , but the Truthmaker Approach takes this to be generalisable much further. The Truthmaker Approach takes the task of metaphysics to be to give an account of the truthmakers of *all* truths. This means that we must provide an account of, e.g., 'Otto is red-haired', which cannot be made true simply by my dog, Otto, since he could exist without being red-haired, and cannot be made true by the property *red-hairedness*, which has no special connection to the particularities of any dog. The prime candidate for this truthmaker would be the fact *that Otto is red-haired*: by virtue of the fact's existence, so the thought goes, the truth of 'Otto is red-haired' is guaranteed. However the truthmaking relation may not be so transparent – should we believe that macrophysical facts are fixed by microphysical facts, the truthmaker for this same statement may be *that particles $p_1 - p_n$ are behaving in way W* . This shows that for the Truthmaker Approach, *truths* are not metaphysically committing – only *truthmakers* are. Furthermore, while the truthmakers do the metaphysical work, this doesn't capture all aspects of our language, possibly allowing the

Truthmaker Approach to be non-reductive, and accordingly mention of reduction is rare in the Truthmaker Approach literature.

We will not delve further into the details here except to make two clarificatory points, concerning the truthmaking relation and, relatedly, the nature of the theory given by the Truthmaker Approach metaphysician. Both distinctions are key to distinguishing the Quinean and Truthmaker Approaches.

First, the Truthmaker Approach insists on a relation that is, as Armstrong puts it, ‘cross-categorical’ (2004, 6). That is, it is construed as a relation between something linguistic and something entirely extra-linguistic and worldly. This difference is stark, and comes from a concern that the structure of our language contains all manner of accidents to which we shouldn’t be hostage. The Truthmaker Approach thus ‘eschews anything like a privileged language of regimentation’ (Cameron 2020, 236) since it is attempting to get away from the distractions of language.

A second important aspect that emerges from this basic outline of the Truthmaker Approach is that the terms of the metaphysical theory need not ‘play the same theoretical role’ (Cameron 2010, 251) as their linguistic analogues. The truths belong within a body of theory, and their place therein *may* depend on their contribution to it, but the role of a truthmaker is to explain the *basis* for the truth, and this does not incur the same restrictions. A truthmaker need not have any role in *our* theory as long as it has a role in the theory dedicated to articulating our metaphysics.

2.3 Judging the evidence

We have already noted an initial suspicion arising most importantly from Janssen-Lauret (2017) (but consistent with other treatments, e.g., Beaney 2003; 2016, Chapman 2013) that perhaps Stebbing’s anti-foundational ambitions mark her out as proto-Quinean. However on looking closely at the evidence from Stebbing’s work, her ideas emerge as more suggestive of a proto-Truthmaker Approach – to see this, let us examine the evidence.

As we saw in §1, Stebbing is concerned to give analysis a central role in philosophy – the primary alternative, deductive metaphysics, is not viable. Deductive metaphysics establishes a standard with a set of metaphysical principles, and uses these to justify those of our beliefs which *can* meet the standard. But, Stebbing says, we shouldn’t use metaphysics to *justify* our beliefs, because our beliefs already have their grounds! Rather we need to *analyse* what it is that we believe. However while all forms of analysis are potentially useful,⁹ metaphysics requires directional analysis. As Stebbing describes this method,

⁹At this point Stebbing suggests that the ‘same-level’ analyses provided by analytic definition

it doesn't aim at statements equivalent in meaning to what we start with, but at more clearly identifying what was picked out (in Stebbing's terms, referred to) by our starting statements. This clarity is *metaphysical*, and Stebbing's description of the endpoint strikingly prefigures truthmaking talk:

[i]n my opinion there are final facts, and these final facts are the facts which *make propositions true* (or false). (1933b, 36, my emphasis)

The picture gets more sophisticated when we consider Stebbing's recognition of the challenge inherent to metaphysical enquiry. We might claim that once we recognise, following Moore, that a large part of our beliefs are *true*, and thus that what they say is true, there isn't much left to do,¹⁰ but for Stebbing, there is. Substantial difficulty remains, not just in constructing a theory, but also for structural reasons:

[t]he process of analysis is more or less untidy owing both to our ignorance of the ultimate constituents of the world and the mode of their arrangement and to the lack of isomorphism between the structure of language and the structure of facts. (1932, 82)

For Stebbing we thus cannot expect the goal of our enquiry (the facts) to have the same structure as what we're aiming to clarify (our language) because the domains are different in kind. This commitment to a cross-categorial project mimics the Truthmaker Approach as described above. The lack of isomorphism seems also to rule out reduction as a general aim, in line with Stebbing's reservations about that notion – she says that 'I should prefer to avoid the misleading term "reduced"' (1933a, 11), and criticises Wisdom's notion of analysis on much these grounds in her 1939a.

Another similarity between Stebbing's directional analysis and the Truthmaker Approach emerges from considering another distinction that is important to her view. As noted above, we must be careful about the kinds of view that we take to be instances of (or related to) the Truthmaker Approach because the more commonsense notion of 'making true' does not carry the same kind

and clarification help demonstrate the significance of what we say, but we might see a further application looking ahead toward Stebbing's project in her (1939b). Douglas and Nassim (2021) depict Stebbing's work therein as advocating a 'logical interventionism' which relies on logicians examining arguments in dialogue with others, and making 'good-faith efforts to find some logical form validating the inference' (14) – this might be seen as a particular application of analytic clarification to get us to recognise the reasoning of those arguments. This would be in line with Chapman's comments on Stebbing's later focus on same-level analysis (Chapman 2013, 98–9).

¹⁰This is the outcome for the 'easy ontology' approach of, e.g., Thomasson (2007; 2014). For reasons of space we cannot explore this approach here, but this view holds that we can resolve ontological questions 'straightforwardly by conceptual and/or empirical methods' (2014, 12).

of commitment. This is a good reason to be careful before attributing the view to, say, the early Wittgenstein, whose position seems better understood as seeking *reduction* to atomic facts, and for distinctive reasons (see Morris 2008, 27, n. 3). We can make the connection clearer, though, by considering how Stebbing speaks of facts. She says that ‘we must admit that there are non-basic facts. But non-basic facts are of a different kind from basic facts’ (1932, 81). What is meant by this?

The point is clarified in Stebbing’s discussion of how true statements ‘refer’ to facts. She makes a distinction that is easiest put as between *direct* and *indirect* reference.¹¹ A proposition directly refers to the fact that one *knows* to hold by virtue of holding the relevant true belief – direct reference is thus a transparent relation. But since the nature of the world is not transparent to us, and since as noted above the structures of language and of facts are not isomorphic, our statements do not directly refer to basic/ultimate/final facts. To not express a fact at all would simply be to be *false*, so the facts to which ‘ordinary’ truths refer must be non-basic. But these non-basic facts are not the ultimate basis for the truths, otherwise presumably they would *be* the basic facts. Thus when we state some truth, we *directly refer* to a non-basic fact but *indirectly refer* to a basic fact – indeed we refer to a succession of facts which are more basic than the starting point, but not genuinely basic – Stebbing says that analysis aims to identify ‘everything [the proposition] refers to, however indirectly’ (1932, 79).

Stebbing even claims that we cannot make *any* statement that directly refers to a basic fact (1932, 80), apparently because language is always somewhat general but basic facts are maximally specific, meaning propositions entail the relevant basic facts but not vice versa (1933b, 32). The reasoning here seems to be that the most specific we can be with language is to say ‘*This is like that*’ with the relevant context. But any context supplied will itself be general if stated explicitly, and without context we cannot understand the demonstratives’ meaning. Stebbing thinks that we must aim for a less ambitious goal – to give statements that *indicate* basic facts, where for a fact to be indicated is for our reference to that fact to be somewhat transparent (1932, 79). We might illuminate Stebbing’s notion of indication thus: suppose that ‘The team stood on the pitch’ is true, so it refers directly to the fact *that the team stood on the pitch*. Among the facts this sentence may indirectly refer to is *that 11 people who play together stood on the pitch*, but this is less transparent than it could be owing to the fact that ‘team’ doesn’t

¹¹Stebbing’s terminology is more variable: in her 1932, where the distinction is made, she initially speaks of ‘immediate’ and ‘ultimate’ reference, though in the process also describes indirect reference (78–9). However she then speaks of ‘direct and indirect knowing’ (92), and earlier speaks both of our referring to facts ‘with varying degrees of indirectness’ (65) and of direct/indirect reference to objects (73). My intention in speaking of direct/indirect reference is to give the clearest and simplest version; immediate and ultimate reference would not suffice, since Stebbing suggests that we can indirectly know a *range* of facts, not just basic ones.

wear its plurality on its sleeve. So we might say ‘The team were arrayed on the pitch’ or ‘The team stood together on the pitch’ do a better job of indicating the second fact. Of course this is not likely to be a candidate for being anywhere near a basic fact, but this shows that indication applies more widely for Stebbing: a proposition might just indicate a *more* basic fact than the fact to which it directly refers.

This need to appeal to the *indication* of basic facts because we cannot expect to directly refer to them demonstrates further how theoretical role cannot be a requirement for Stebbing. Aside from the fact that I think Stebbing would regard this as a ‘muddle’ (an admonishment she uses often), because these facts are seen as simply *there* as the basis for our true statements, the lack of isomorphism between the structures of language and of facts means that even if our language might be responsive to considerations of theoretical role, as we attempt to analyse facts we move progressively closer to facts that can play no theoretical role since they lack the structure of our language.

There are thus good reasons, caution notwithstanding, to treat Stebbing’s view of metaphysics as a proto-Truthmaker Approach. The basic facts that Stebbing thinks directional analysis relies on are analogous to truthmakers, forming the ultimate basis for our true statements. The difference in kind between basic and non-basic facts is also telling – if there is a more basic fact, it does all the truthmaking required, making the less basic fact something that comes along without further commitment. Another important feature is that a clarification of our theory need not go to a ‘lower level’ – such clarification *is* offered by analytic definition and clarification (and perhaps by postulational analysis though this is less clear), but these are different projects – one can clarify our theory, Stebbing thinks, without doing metaphysics.

Drawing this connection is interesting simply for clarifying Stebbing’s position, and for broadening our understanding of the historical connections of the Truthmaker Approach. However, the contrast also allows us to make a more detailed observation about differences in how these approaches view the philosophical project, revealed through different points of disagreement with logical positivism.

3 Divisions within philosophy

So far we have articulated a view of Stebbing’s project on which it has a closer relationship to the Truthmaker Approach than to the Quinean Approach. The time at which Stebbing was writing was still formative for the traditions of analytic philosophy, and Stebbing would not live to have the opportunity to weigh in on many of the relevant discussions – she died in 1943, five years before

Quine's 'On what there is' (1948) presented analytic philosophy with the germ of the Quinean project, and longer before Quine's naturalism was fully articulated. The key elements of the Truthmaker Approach are still more distant – the term 'truthmaker' as a philosophical term of art seems to trace to Mulligan et al. (1984), and Armstrong sees the notion as having roots in ideas shared between himself and C. B. Martin in the mid-20th century (2004, 1), but much of its explicit articulation as a metametaphysical approach has been in the 21st century. This is to say, once again, that we are tracing historical roots, not relocating approaches root and branch.

Nevertheless, Stebbing's ideas in the mid-1930s bear striking resemblances to those distinctive to the Truthmaker Approach, and in this final section we will consider whether this can furnish interesting insights into key philosophical disagreements of the time. We saw in §1 that there seemed to be a tension between taking seriously Stebbing's anti-foundationalism and both her positive attitude to directional analysis and her qualified admiration for logical positivism as moving partially in the right direction. Can we now explain Stebbing's position more clearly?

3.1 Stebbing's 'divide and conquer' approach

Our account is helpful at least in making sense of Stebbing's critique of postulational analysis. Stebbing sees some allure in postulational analysis and in logical positivism, for which such analysis was in her view the flagship method. She clearly regards deductive metaphysics as untenable, and those who see metaphysics as needing to proceed via analysis as on a better track – since she regards postulational analysis as a kind of analysis, the logical positivists' method as she sees it is a step in the right direction. What, then, is wrong with the approach? Referring in particular to Carnap's work, in which postulational analysis plays a central role, Stebbing compares it to practices in physics, saying that

physics could present a system only because its world-picture is essentially abstract... physics ignores what does not fit in. Carnap's construction of the world ought not to be abstract. (1933*b*, 26)

This particular understanding of abstractness needs unpacking. Given what we have seen so far, for Stebbing postulational analysis has no role to play in meaning analysis, since that is captured by analytic definition and clarification, so if the logical positivists think of postulational analysis as engaged in *this* project, then it just offers meanings for words in a way that does not show deference to usage. But what else is available as an interpretation of postulational analysis?

The only reasonable way to take it, given Stebbing's assumptions, is as constructing an *alternative* language. This is what Stebbing takes as problematically

abstract – that a given postulational analysis furnishes a language that *could* be used doesn't tell us enough. The system presented by physics tells us, so Stebbing suggests, that this way of talking captures all the events and relations that physics seeks to capture – this is useful because for Stebbing abstractness is accepted alongside it. The most obvious example of such abstractness is seen in scientific model, where we have a clear idea of what we wish to capture but know that we are excluding certain facts since 'physical science is concerned with ... those aspects alone of what is sensibly perceived in [the world] that are susceptible of metrical treatment' (1937, 116–7). To attempt to do this universally would be to give a model for *everything*, but if we do so by adverting to a purpose and excluding anything, then since we're ignoring something, we're *not* giving a model for everything. This method, Stebbing thinks, is just not suited to the entirely general goals of metaphysics: she elsewhere says that 'no constructed system could be exhaustive with reference to the external world' (1933a, 25), and that for a constructed system this would be 'self-contradictory' (ibid., 30). She says that analysis can have this goal, but since analytic definition and clarification have the more limited remit of clarifying meaning, only directional analysis could possess this virtue.

Why do the logical positivists think they can pursue such a project? Stebbing's story for this helps to further clarify the core disagreement. They think that the method can be applied, she says, because they 'treat all facts as linguistic facts' (Stebbing 1933b, 33). Thus it would seem that for Stebbing, they are conflating the metaphysical and the linguistic. But the disagreement goes deeper still.

One of the points of Moore's thought that Stebbing is at pains to emphasise, and to use as a pillar of her own approach, is the foregrounding of our knowledge of certain truths. She draws our attention to Moore's 'distinction between "understanding *p*" and "knowing the analysis of *p*"' and claims that recognising this distinction shows that we cannot 'analyse what we do not understand' (1932, 87). There are two important components here: that we 'distinguish the question whether we *know* that a given proposition is true from the question whether we are able *correctly to analyse it*' (1933b, 7), and that we 'must begin by accepting as *true* certain commonsense statements' (ibid., 6). Stebbing accepts both parts and takes this to contrast starkly with logical positivism, citing Schlick's view that '[t]he meaning of a proposition has to be known before its truth can be established' (1931, 114). Thus epistemological and semantic projects come together for the logical positivists, and for Stebbing this has the further problematic result that 'the problem of knowledge resolves itself into the problem *how* language *can* be used to communicate' (1933b, 18).

This brings out Stebbing's disagreement with logical positivism more clearly: in her view it conflates three philosophical projects. This is complicated by the

logical positivists' claim to eschew metaphysics, so they would not fully recognise the characterisation even to deny it, but the logical positivists bring together an epistemological, semantic and metaphysical project under one heading. This is brought out further when considering Stebbing's criticisms of Russell, who is *not* one of logical positivism's advocates. Russell also brings together metaphysical and semantic projects, through the attempt to give an account of meaning in terms of what we refer to and how – for Russell we analyse what content there is for us to mean at all, allowing semantic investigation to substitute for metaphysical investigation. Stebbing accordingly criticises his principle that 'logical constructions are to be substituted for inferred entities' (1914, 115) – she criticises him for using this approach to eliminate tables as inferred entities rather than using it 'to assert something about how tables are to be regarded when it is admitted that I could truly say "This is a table"' (1933a, 20).

In contrast, Stebbing wants to divide these projects clearly. The epistemological project is, following Stebbing's Moorean influence, non-foundational and works from the acceptance of a broad base of knowledge that is better justified than any subsequent argument. This anti-foundationalism in fact seems to go beyond the acceptance of common-sense beliefs, as suggested in Stebbing's later comments on science:

To question *one* physical law is possible only if there are *other* relevant laws that are not at the moment also being questioned... The development of a science does not in the least resemble the building of a house... There is nothing in its development comparable to a single foundation upon which, once well and securely laid, the building may be erected... (1937, 69)

Aside from this, though, two projects remain. The semantic project is captured by some kinds of analysis – those shown in analytic definition and clarification. But we also have a distinctively metaphysical project – we analyse not the *meaning* of the statements we accept, but the facts they refer to. The ambitions of the Truthmaker Approach amount to something similar – metaphysics is on this approach treated as 'very, very hard' (Cameron 2020, 242), while trying to avoid any knock-on effect that either what we mean or what we know is hard to access. There is certainly more to be asked about how sharp this separation can be since it must at least be possible to, e.g., raise questions about the epistemology and semantics of metaphysical claims, but this goes beyond the scope of the paper.

3.2 Quine's 'unifying' approach

Having clarified the basis for Stebbing's disagreement with logical positivism, we can compare it briefly to Quine's project and corresponding disagreement.

It is part of the lore of the history of analytic philosophy that Quine's criticisms of logical positivism played an important role in the transition away from that movement, but there is a lack of consensus about the import of Quine's disagreement, and the complexity of explaining this disagreement comes out more clearly when considered in comparison to Stebbing's complaint. Though both thinkers are anti-foundationalist, the substance of their anti-foundationalism is very different. It is often stated that a

disdain for the metaphysical... was finally put to rest when W. V. Quine demonstrated that Carnap's last attempt to dodge metaphysics fails, and then showed that metaphysics has a legitimate place within a generally naturalistic framework. (Alspector-Kelly 2001, 93)

The route to this is generally taken to be the undermining of the 'non-metaphysical' foundation of Carnap's version of the project – previous examples of the approach had already run into internecine disagreements, with difficulties regarding the nature of observation or 'protocol' sentences, but Carnap made the most sophisticated attempt at articulating the project of using a verificationist theory of meaning to treat the project of philosophy as doing nothing more than the analysis of meaning in a way that complemented empirical enquiry, functioning as a 'logic of science' (Carnap 1937, §72).

Quine's attack comes in various guises, but particularly important are Quine 1936; 1951*b*; 1960*a*. The dominant view for some time seemed to be (as suggested in the above quote) that by showing that the distinction between analytic and synthetic could not be made in the way that the logical positivists had hoped, the grounds for claiming that philosophical claims should be simply meaning-giving so in an important sense *contentless* disappeared. The claims in question then regain their metaphysical significance. This view has since been challenged by a range of observations, not least the recognition that Quine took himself to be disagreeing with the letter, not the spirit, of logical positivism,¹² as suggested by some of his own comments, e.g. that:

The statement of verificationism... is that 'evidence for the truth of a sentence is identical with the meaning of the sentence'; and I submit that if sentences in general had meanings, their meanings would be just that. (Quine 1986, 155–6)

And that:

I haven't thought of myself as destroying [logical positivism, but] as contributing to what it seemed to me needed further development,

¹²There is a wealth of literature on the Quine-Carnap disagreement, but see e.g. Price (2009), Ebbs (2011), Verhaegh (2017).

thinking of it as one thinks of a science in general. What I felt so valuable...especially through Carnap, was the logical rigour that it aspired to. (Quine and Fara 1994)

This of course raises questions about how to understand the direction in which Quine wants to take philosophy, but that is not our central concern here (see n. 7 above for mention of this debate).

Rather, what is relevant is that even though Quine does not foreground the articulation of the *meanings* of terms because, among other reasons, he holds that an account of language must involve the theorist's 'own imposition, toward settling what is objectively indeterminate' (Quine 1968, 191) he *accepts* the logical positivists' foregrounding of semantic concerns. He thus takes on the view that philosophy ought to proceed by examining language, and that this will provide access (the only access there could be) to the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of our project. Sentences are for Quine our 'entering wedge' (1992, §14) into giving any theory whatsoever. Because he accepts the unified nature of the philosophical project, Quine's anti-foundationalism and holism is thus *at once* semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological. Whereas for Stebbing a holistic, anti-foundationalist epistemology can be isolated from a foundational approach to metaphysics (with the status of semantics less clear), for Quine the anti-foundationalism applies to every aspect of our philosophical theorising. This is why the Quinean Approach looks for a term's theoretical role – the place of some entity in our metaphysics depends on all the resources we have available, including our semantic and epistemological resources, with *everything* taking on the status of a posit.

4 Conclusion

This paper has aimed to generate insight into Stebbing's work on philosophical methods by bringing it into dialogue with some ideas from recent metametaphysics. The era in which Stebbing wrote, while formative for what is now thought of as analytic philosophy, was fraught and complex, as revealed by Stebbing's uncertainties about how, if at all, the project of analysis might work, but exploring the connections to the Truthmaker Approach gives a clearer idea of the implications of Stebbing's view.

Furthermore, exploring the differences between Stebbing's proto-Truthmaker Approach and the Quinean Approach makes something else clear – while it is right to recognise the role that Stebbing played as a sympathetic critic of logical positivism and to see her as pointing toward an approach that would leave behind those commitments, this misses an important distinction. One path out

of logical positivism treats the overall philosophical project as unified and centred on language, but reconceives this unified project as holistic rather than atomistic. But the other path rejects this assimilation of philosophical projects into a single whole and insists on separating them – this approach has Stebbing as a forerunner and extends to the contemporary Truthmaker Approach. This is important not just for a clearer picture of the shape of the development of the history of analytic philosophy; it also makes clearer the variety of theoretical frameworks underpinning analytic metaphysics after logical positivism’s ‘golden age’.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the participants at the TiLPS History of Analytic Philosophy Workshop and at the XXXXX Research Seminar for helpful questions and comments.

References

- Alspector-Kelly, M. (2001), ‘On quine on Carnap on ontology’, *Philosophical Studies* **102**(1), 93–122.
- Armstrong, D. (2004), *Truth and Truthmakers*, Cambridge University Press.
- Ayer, A. J. (1936), *Language, Truth and Logic*, Gollancz, London.
- Ayer, A. J. (1977), *Part of My Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Beaney, M. (2003), Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna analysis, in F. Stadler, ed., ‘Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook 10: The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism’, pp. 339–350.
- Beaney, M. (2016), Susan Stebbing and the early reception of logical empiricism in Britain, in F. Stadler, ed., ‘Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook 18: Influences on the Aufbau’, pp. 339–350.
- Berto, F. and Plebani, M. (2015), *Ontology and Metaontology: A Contemporary Guide*, Bloomsbury.
- Black, M. (1933), ‘Philosophical analysis’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **33**, 237–258.
- Bronstein, E. (1934), ‘Miss Stebbing’s directional analysis and basic facts’, *Analysis* **2**(1–2), 10–14.
- Cameron, R. (2010), ‘How to have a radically minimal ontology’, *Philosophical Studies* **151**(2), 249–264.

- Cameron, R. (2020), Truthmaking and metametaphysics, in J. Miller and R. Bliss, eds, 'Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics', Routledge.
- Carnap, R. (1937), *The Logical Syntax of Language*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, London. trans. Smeaton, Amethe.
- Chapman, S. (2013), *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Douglas, A. and Nassim, J. (2021), 'Susan Stebbing's logical interventionism', *History and Philosophy of Logic* .
- Ebbs, G. (2011), 'Carnap and Quine on truth by convention', *Mind* **120(478)**, 193–237.
- Egerton, K. (2016), 'Getting off the inwagen: A critique of Quinean metaontology', *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* **4(6)**, 1–22.
- Egerton, K. (2020), Quine's metametaphysics, in J. Miller and R. Bliss, eds, 'Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics', Routledge.
- Janssen-Lauret, F. (2017), 'Susan Stebbing, incomplete symbols, and founder-entist meta-ontology', *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* **5(2)**, 1–17.
- Jenkins, C. S. (2010), 'What is ontological realism?', *Philosophy Compass* **5(10)**, 880–890.
- MacBride, F. (2020), Truthmakers, in E. N. Zalta, ed., 'The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy', spring 2020 edn, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Manley, D. (2009), Introduction: a guided tour of metametaphysics, in D. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman, eds, 'Metametaphysics', Oxford University Press.
- Morris, M. (2008), *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus*, Routledge.
- Mulligan, K., Simons, P. and Smith, B. (1984), 'Truth-makers', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **44**, 287–321.
- Price, H. (2009), Metaphysics after Carnap: the ghost who walks?, in D. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman, eds, 'Metametaphysics', Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W. V. (1936), Truth by convention, in 'Ways of Paradox', Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Quine, W. V. (1948), 'On what there is', *Review of Metaphysics* **2**, 21–38.

- Quine, W. V. (1951a), 'Ontology and ideology', *Philosophical Studies* **2**(1), 11–15.
- Quine, W. V. (1951b), 'Two dogmas of empiricism', *The Philosophical Review* **60**(1), 20–43.
- Quine, W. V. (1960a), 'Carnap and logical truth', *Synthese* **12**(4), 350–74.
- Quine, W. V. (1960b), *Word & Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Quine, W. V. (1968), 'Ontological relativity', *The Journal of Philosophy* **65**(7), 185–212.
- Quine, W. V. (1983), 'Ontology and ideology revisited', *The Journal of Philosophy* **53**(9), 499–502.
- Quine, W. V. (1986), Reply to gibson, in L. E. Hahn and P. A. Schilpp, eds, 'The Philosophy of W. V. Quine', La Salle: Open Court.
- Quine, W. V. (1992), *Pursuit of Truth*, 2nd edn., Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W. V. and Fara, R. (1994), 'In conversation: W. v. quine'.
- Russell, B. (1905), 'On denoting', *Mind* **14**(56), 479–493.
- Russell, B. (1914), *The relation of sense-data to physics*, Longmans, pp. 308–321.
- Russell, B. and Whitehead, A. N. (1910), *Principia Mathematica*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press.
- Schlick, M. (1931), The future of philosophy, in G. Ryle, ed., 'Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy', Oxford University Press.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1932), 'The method of analysis in metaphysics', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **33**, 65–94.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1933a), 'Constructions', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **34**, 1–30.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1933b), 'Logical positivism and analysis', *Proceedings of the British Academy* **19**, 53–87.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1934), 'Directional analysis and basic facts', *Analysis* **2**(3), 33–36.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1939a), 'Some puzzles about analysis', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **39**, 69–84.
- Stebbing, L. S. (1939b), *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Penguin Books.
- Stebbing, S. (1937), *Philosophy and the Physicists*, Methuen & Co.
- Thomasson, A. (2007), *Ordinary Objects*, Oxford University Press.

- Thomasson, A. (2014), *Ontology Made Easy*, Oxford University Press.
- van Inwagen, P. (1998), 'Meta-ontology', *Erkenntnis* **48**(2/3), 233–250.
- van Inwagen, P. (2009), Being, existence, and ontological commitment, in D. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman, eds, 'Metametaphysics', Oxford University Press.
- Verhaegh, S. (2017), 'Blurring boundaries: Carnap, quine, and the internal–external distinction', *Erkenntnis* **82**, 873–890.
- Wisdom, J. (1934), 'Is analysis a useful method in philosophy? ii', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* **13**, 53–118.