**Susan Stebbing on Moral Philosophy and Ways of Living**

Running Head: Susan Stebbing on Moral Philosophy

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to provide an exposition of Susan Stebbing’s moral philosophy. Stebbing is increasingly recognized as a key figure in early analytic philosophy. However, there is no existing scholarship on her moral philosophy. We examine how Stebbing’s moral philosophy connects to that of two important figures who Stebbing herself identifies as influences on her work: Moore and Aristotle. We argue that while there are clear signs of influence from Moore, Stebbing is also critical of his abstract approach to moral theorizing. In a manner more reminiscent of Aristotle, Stebbing argues that moral philosophy must concern itself with “the ways in which men live”. We argue that Stebbing can plausibly be characterized as both a first level and second level ‘Aristotelian’ ethicist. This is significant since neo-Aristotelian ethics is usually understood as having emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in the work of thinkers like Foot, Hursthouse, and MacIntyre. We also raise an objection to Stebbing from her student, Margaret Macdonald, and reconstruct a response to that objection on Stebbing's behalf.

Key words: Susan Stebbing, ethics, meta-ethics, G. E. Moore, Aristotle, W.D. Ross, Margaret Macdonald, Aristotelian ethics, ethical naturalism

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an exposition of Susan Stebbing’s (1885–1943) moral philosophy.[[1]](#endnote-1) As recent scholars have noted,[[2]](#endnote-2) Stebbing was a central figure in the development of early analytic philosophy.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet, there is virtually no existing scholarship on Stebbing’s moral philosophy.[[4]](#endnote-4) This is despite the fact that her two final published works, *Ideals and Illusions* (1941) and *Men and Moral Principles* (1944), focus primarily on ethics. The former was published during the Second World War and, like previous texts such as *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), was intended for a wide public audience during a time of democratic crisis. The latter was delivered as the Hobhouse Memorial Lecture (at the London School of Economics) in May 1943 and published posthumously as a short pamphlet.[[5]](#endnote-5) By focusing on these texts, we reconstruct both Stebbing’s critique of moral philosophy as it was being practiced by many of her contemporaries and her views on how moral philosophy ought, instead, to look.

Specifically, we examine how Stebbing’s moral philosophy connects to that of two important figures who Stebbing herself identifies as influences on her work: G. E. Moore and Aristotle. We argue that, while Stebbing’s position does bear important similarities with Moore’s view as espoused in *Principia Ethica* (1903), there are also notable (and deliberate) points of divergence. We then argue that Stebbing’s moral philosophy has enough features in common with Aristotle that she can be thought of as an early ‘Aristotelian’ ethical naturalist *avant la lettre.[[6]](#endnote-6)* It is worth making clear at this point that it is not our aim to establish that Stebbing directly *influenced* the work of later figures in the ethical and meta-ethical Aristotelian traditions, such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, or Alasdair MacIntyre.[[7]](#endnote-7)  Rather, we here make the case for thinking that Stebbing *pre-empted* the views of twentieth century virtue ethicists and Neo-Aristotelian naturalists in significant ways (in that sense, her work may be thought of as a stepping-stone – or Stebbing-stone, if you will – towards their work).

1. “Moral philosophy, I repeat, is not a science.”

In a review of *Men and Moral Principles* published in 1943, after Stebbing’s death, Margaret Macdonald, her PhD supervisee*,[[8]](#endnote-8)* remarked that Stebbing

wrote less on ethics than on some other philosophical subjects but all who knew her well knew of her great concern with moral problems and their relation to political affairs. (Macdonald, “Men and Moral Principles” 76)[[9]](#endnote-9)

Macdonald is right. It was not until this late period in Stebbing’s life that she turned her attention explicitly to writing about ethics – although her life outside philosophy attests to her care and concern for the well-being of others.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is not a coincidence that Stebbing’s last two published works are ethical writings. Like other thinkers in British philosophy during the inter- and post-war period, Stebbing was horrified by much of what she saw taking place in Nazi occupied territories. *Ideals and Illusions,* published during the war, can be thought of as (amongst other things) an attempt to provide a philosophical ground for the moral condemnation of Nazism. In both *Ideals and Illusions* and *Men and Moral Principles,* Stebbing attempts to justify the intuition that there are, morally speaking, better and worse ways for a human being to live.

In this section, we outline Stebbing’s critique of moral philosophy as it was being practiced by her contemporaries. Stebbing’s critique is targeted at several different parties, including linguistic philosophers, utilitarians, and deontologists – and in that sense is quite broad. The influence of British intuitionism, a meta-ethical tradition dominant in the 1930s that took its lead from Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, is also evident in Stebbing’s ethical stance – and we note some aspects of Stebbing’s view that may draw on this tradition. However, as we will argue in section three, there are also clear signs that Stebbing is explicitly criticizing aspects of Moore’s view as espoused in *Principia Ethica.*[[11]](#endnote-11)For now, rather than thinking of Stebbing’s criticisms as blanket criticisms of any of these individual positions, we think it more helpful to construe what Stebbing is doing as critiquing a *paradigm*: a set of shared assumptions about how moral philosophy does or ought to work. Her case against the ethical theorizing of her contemporaries, therefore, is a *methodological* argument. It is for this reason that, in her review, Macdonald describes *Men and Moral Principles* as an “essay in the methodology of ethics.” (Macdonald, “Men and Moral Principles” 76) For Stebbing, the problem lies with the way that moral philosophy is being done, rather than the positions that are being arrived at (and, in fact, we will find that there may be a place for utilitarian principles like ‘always maximize happiness’ or deontological notions of duty in Stebbing’s own ethical system).

In *Men and Moral Principles,* Stebbing begins by rejecting the idea that moral problems are linguistic problems. While she does not specify who she has in mind, given the time at which she was writing it is likely that she is referring to the logical positivists and Wittgenstein (Stebbing discusses the connection between logical positivism and Wittgenstein, as well as Moore, in her 1933 lecture to the British Academy “Logical Positivism and Analysis”). It’s worth noting that Stebbing sees the logical positivists as having derived their views from the early Wittgenstein. For example, in “Logical Positivism and Analysis”, she writes: “Logical Positivism may be regarded as in no small measure dueto the inspiration of Wittgenstein.” (Stebbing, “Logical Positivism and Analysis” 54)[[12]](#endnote-12) By the time of *Men and Moral Principles,* Stebbing may also have had in mind the later Wittgenstein’s views on the role of linguistic analysis in philosophy. The *Philosophical Investigations* would not be published for another twelve years but Wittgenstein was lecturing his students in Cambridge, including Macdonald,[[13]](#endnote-13) on linguistic analysis throughout the 1930s. With this context in mind, Stebbing writes:

Certain contemporary philosophers seem contented to regard moral philosophy only as proving occasions for ethical remarks and are interested in these remarks only in so far as they provide exercises in linguistic analysis; these exercises, treated as games requiring no small degree of specialised skill, are like chess-problems to an ardent chess player, inexhaustibly amusing but of no practical concern in the business of living. (*MMP* 4)

Earlier in her career, Stebbing had argued that philosophical analysis – the concept at the heart of the ‘analytic’ movement – can and should generate more than just linguistic insights (Stebbing, “The Method of Analysis”).[[14]](#endnote-14) Here, we find a similar line of thinking applied to moral philosophy. Stebbing’s view is that it is notenough for a philosopher just to seek to clarify our use of language or certain terms. Instead, she argues:

Moral philosophers, I contend, must be concerned with the ways in which men live – their ways of life which embody their ideals. I conceive that it falls within the proper province of moral philosophers to formulate ideals worth living for and to attempt to make clear principles which may afford guides for action. (*MMP* 4)

Stebbing’s concern, then, is that moral philosophy as it is being practiced by linguistic philosophers (broadly construed) is of no genuine practical import. Linguistic approaches to moral problems may “enable us to recognize that an ethical statement is being made” (*MMP* 3) but are of no use when it comes to how we ought actually to *live* our lives. Moral philosophers should be in the business of identifying “ideals” or “guides for action” but in the prevailing linguistic paradigm, moral philosophy restricts itself to helping us recognize what it means to make an ethical judgement (we will say more about Stebbing’s use of the term ‘ideals’ in section 3.2).

Stebbing is not just critical of philosophers who treat moral problems as linguistic problems. She is also critical of those philosophers who, as she sees it, attempt to treat ethics as though it were a science. Who might Stebbing have in mind here? One thing that Stebbing makes clear is that her targets are those thinkers who seek to discuss ethics and morality *in the abstract* (*MMP* 7). That is, moral philosophers who attempt to move away from everyday experience and discuss morality in a way that is detached from the real world – similarly to how a mathematician discusses abstract theorems. In mathematics, Stebbing claims, this kind of abstract theorizing is appropriate. For, as she puts it, “Nothing that happens in the world is relevant to the truth or falsity of any mathematical theorem.” (*MMP* 5) But Stebbing’s view is that this kind of abstract theorizing is *not* appropriate to moral philosophy.

Stebbing claims that ‘sciences’ (or disciplines) are differentiated by the fact that they deal with different kinds of *situations.* Stebbing describes a situation as a “state of affairs in which various circumstances are conjoined.” (*MMP* 8) A situation consequently has “internal complexity” and contains “material” for different kinds of scientists or theorists to engage with. An economist engages with a situation if there is economic ‘material’ (e.g., financial considerations) for them to discuss, a geologist engages with a situation if its ‘matter’ concerns the structure and composition of the earth, and so on. Thus (to use Stebbing’s own examples), geology, economics, and moral philosophy are different areas of inquiry because “The geologist deals with geological situations, the economist deals with economic situations and the moral philosopher deals with ethical situations.” (*MMP* 8) It is important to note that Stebbing also maintains that moral situations necessarily “contain at least one sentient being.” (*MMP* 12) Thus, not all situations are moral situations.

What sets moral philosophy apart from scientific inquiry, Stebbing argues, is the inherent complexity of moral situations*.* Moral situations are so complex, she claims, that they cannot be discussed in the abstract way that scientific situations can be. As she puts it:

We are, at least in the case of ordinary complex ethical situations, confronted with a variety of judgements of utterly diverse logical types. Owing to this diversity it is extremely difficult to select even relatively stable isolates in terms of which judgements of good and evil can significantly be made with regards to sets of ethical situations as wholes. (*MMP* 14)

Stebbing’s point is that ethical situations are too complex for there to be a universal or wholly generalizable rule or law that applies in any and all circumstances. There are no “stable isolates.” Ethical situations – and questions about what is good and bad (or right and wrong) and what we ought to do – cannot be boiled down to a single universal principle or even a set of such principles.

Equipped with the laws of physics, it is possible for a physicist to observe a physical state of affairs (a physical ‘situation’) and explain what is going on (e.g. ‘the rock is moving towards the ground because of the force of gravity’). But the same cannot be said of ethical ‘laws’ or ‘rules.’ What is true in one situation may not be true in another – meaning that the ‘law’ in question is not universalizable, and thus not really a law at all. For instance, Stebbing uses the example of the moral rule of thumb “*Speak the truth*” (*MMP* 16) and points out that while this may appear to be a good rule in many situations, it will not in others (contemporary ‘axe-murderer’ objections to Kantian ethics come to mind here). The same is true, she suggests, of moral maxims like ‘one must always keep promises.’

Stebbing claims that “a subject of study is a science only if isolates can be constructed and fruitfully used.” (*MMP* 11) By ‘isolates,’ Stebbing means the kind of universal or wholly generalizable rules discussed above – rules that apply in all situations of a certain kind, but which are isolable from the situations themselves (like the laws of gravitation in physics). And her view is that isolates *cannot* be constructed and fruitfully used in moral philosophy. As she puts it, “it is rarely possible to formulate any theoretical principle from which moral rules ought to be observed by everyone, or even by most people.” (*MMP* 14)[[15]](#endnote-15) Consequently, she concludes that, since science requires isolates and (in her view) isolates cannot be abstracted from moral situations, “Moral philosophy … is not a science.” (*MMP* 18) According to Stebbing, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to moral problems. There are no universal laws of morality.

It is for this reason that both utilitarians (or ‘Hedonists’) and Kantian deontologists are at fault, according to Stebbing, since both attempt to reduce moral situations – and the related question of what is good or bad – down to a universal law. She writes:

Some, for example Kant, have tried to find a single ethical principle, a single moral motive; others have sought a single good, for example, the Hedonists … All alike have failed. Often they have illuminated some problems, partly solved some difficulty, or have laid bare some of the essentials, but always *in spite of,* not *because of,* the method they have used.” (*MMP* 18, emphasis in original)

Stebbing allows that abstract moral theorizing *might* generate some insights – for instance, we might learn from a trolley problem that intuitively saving more people often seems preferable – but that is despite the abstract method being employed, not because of it. In other words, utilitarians and deontologists might have stumbled upon some moral insights, but that should not be read as an endorsement of their method. In fact, Stebbing writes in *Ideals and Illusions* that: “I am convinced that to think in abstractions, when one’s concern is moral philosophy, is to fail as a philosopher.” (*I&I* 10)

There is notable crossover here between Stebbing’s view and that of the prominent moral intuitionist W. D. Ross – though it is also important to note that Stebbing makes no direct reference to Ross in her ethical writing, meaning that any possible influence from Ross on Stebbing can at best be inferred. Stebbing and Ross make comparable objections to the overly abstract and obscuring methodological approaches taken by (what they take to be) first-level deontologists and utilitarians. In two of Ross’s influential works on ethics published in the 1930s (his 1930 *The Right and the Good*, and his 1935-36 Gifford Lectures on *The Foundation of Ethics,* first published in 1939)*,* he targets deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethics, arguing that both approaches “over-simplif[y] the moral life.” (Ross, *Foundations*, 189) Ross argues that both approaches in some way neglect complex elements of a situation which should be taken into account when deciding the right course of action, morally speaking. For example, Ross critiques the utilitarian attempt to “state a single characteristic of all right actions which is the foundation of their rightness.” (Ross, *Right and Good*, 16)[[16]](#endnote-16) Ross deems this overly simplistic, arguing that what makes a given action right is not exhausted by the utilitarian principle that we ought to maximize a plurality of intrinsic goods (1930, 16-7). This is a similar point to the one that Stebbing is making in the passage quoted above, where she states that “some … have sought a single good, for example, the Hedonists … All alike have failed.”[[17]](#endnote-17) In the same way, for Ross, hedonistic utilitarianism ought to be rejected on the basis that “it seems clear that pleasure is not the only thing in life that we think good in itself, that for example we think the possession of a good character … as good or better.” (Ross, *Right and Good*, 17)

Finally, it is notable that both of Ross’s texts referenced above were written soon after he had published his translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1925, which may have motivated his methodological critique of over-abstract approaches to the moral life. As Anthony Skelton writes, with reference to Ross’s rejection of Kant’s deontology and ideal utilitarianism, “Ross could not help being influenced by Aristotle. He was in particular impressed with Aristotle’s methodology and his appeal to the many and the wise.”[[18]](#endnote-18) If the reading of Stebbing we develop below (especially in 3.2) is plausible and her moral methodology can be characterized as Aristotelian, it is possible that both Stebbing and Ross’s motivation for their methodological critiques may have converged at least in part due to the influence of Aristotle’s approach to ethics.

In sum, Stebbing is critical of theorists who reduce moral problems to linguistic problems and those who address moral problems in the kind of abstract way that is, on her view, only appropriate to science. Moral problems of the kind that we encounter in real life are simply too complex to be reduced to abstract isolates and understood by appealing to universal laws. Moral philosophy is not a science and it ought not to be treated like one. This raises the question of how moral philosophy ought, instead, to be approached. We outline Stebbing’s answer to this question in the next section.

1. Excellences, Ideals, and Ways of Living: Stebbing’s Ethics

In her writing on ethics, Stebbing does not explicitly subscribe to a particular normative theory, nor does she provide meta-ethical labels for her views. Nonetheless, our aim in this section is to reconstruct Stebbing’s moral philosophy which, we argue, can be broadly characterized as a form of Aristotelian ethics, while retaining some important influence from Moore. As we noted at the outset, Stebbing’s Aristotelianism is particularly significant because she was writing at a time where virtue ethics (as we currently understand it) was not typically on the table as a rival (first level) normative theory to consequentialism, Kantian ethics, or Moore-inspired intuitionism (of the kind endorsed by Ross). Nor had ‘Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism’ emerged as the (second level) meta-ethical program now associated with the writing of thinkers like Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alastair MacIntyre.

In seeking to understand Stebbing’s ethical position, we take our lead from a remark in *Men and Moral Principles*, where she claims to have “found most help in Aristotle, apart from one big blunder, and from G. E. Moore.” (*MMP* 19)[[19]](#endnote-19) Thus, in 3.1, we examine the relation between Stebbing’s writing and Moore’s ethics as espoused in *Principia Ethica* (1903), and, in 3.2, her relation to Aristotelian ethics.

3.1 Stebbing and Moore

The relationship between Stebbing’s views in *Men and Moral Principles* and *Ideals and Illusions* and Moore’s *Principia Ethica* is complicated. Stebbing explains that her moral philosophy ‘found help’ in Moore (along with Aristotle) and, as we will find, there are important similarities between Stebbing and Moore’s views – not least, the fact that both are critical of attempts to employ generalizationsor reductive simplifications in moral inquiry. For example, both are critical of utilitarians who attempt to reduce goodness down to pleasure. But there are also points of divergence; places where, we argue, Stebbing deliberately targets Moore’s views for criticism. This is of course consistent with what Stebbing says about Moore: one can find help in someone without agreeing with them about everything.

It is also worth noting that understanding the relationship between Stebbing and Moore’s moralphilosophy is even more significant given that the relationship between their *wider* philosophical views has come under scrutiny in recent secondary literature. It was characteristic of early scholarship on Stebbing to describe her as a ‘follower’ or ‘disciple’ of Moore.[[20]](#endnote-20) This impression was at least in part derived from the fact that *Men and Moral Principles* is not the only place where Stebbing describes Moore as having influenced her views.[[21]](#endnote-21) But more recent scholars (notably, Frederique Janssen-Lauret)[[22]](#endnote-22) have argued that when it comes to (e.g.) Stebbing’s account of analysis or philosophy of science, characterizing her straightforwardly as a ‘Moorean’ is quite simply inaccurate – that her work in these (and other) areas goes beyond anything that can plausibly be credited to Moore.[[23]](#endnote-23) The interpretation we put forward in this section contributes to this ongoing scholarly conversation and shows that Stebbing’s moral philosophy did indeed ‘find help’ in Moore but also diverges from his views in significant ways. In the subsequent section, we will argue that the influence of Aristotle takes Stebbing further away still.

At the beginning of *Principia Ethica,* Moore defines ‘Ethics’ as “the general enquiry into what is good.” (*PE* 54) For Moore, the fundamental task of ethics is to answer the question: What is good? Only when that question has been answered, he argues, can we turn our attention to more specific questions about what kinds of actions or conduct can be considered good (*PE* 57–58). Moore’s answer is that: “good is good, and that is the end of the matter.” (*PE* 58) For Moore, ‘good’ is something that cannot be defined; that is, it is a simple notion that cannot be explained to one who doesn’t already know it (just as the color yellow cannot be explained to a person born blind) (*PE* 59). As he puts it:

It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms of reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined. (*PE* 61)

In short, for Moore, the term ‘good’ picks out an “object or idea” that is itself cannot be defined–and thus, importantly, for Moore, cannot be *reduced* to something else. Goodness *just is* goodness.

It is for this reason that Moore argues that ‘Hedonists’ and utilitarians are mistaken, for their view is that ‘good’ is reducible to *pleasure*. Moore famously characterizes such thinkers–and *any* thinkers who attempt to reduce goodness to some other natural property–of having committed the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Their view cannotbe right, he argues, because if it were then the proposition ‘x is good because x is pleasurable’ (for example) would really mean ‘x is pleasurable because x is pleasurable.’ For Moore, goodness *must* be something distinct from any other (natural) property of an action, individual, or character trait in order to make sense of the fact *that* it is good.

There are parts of Moore’s *Principia Ethica* that might plausibly be said to have exerted an influence on Stebbing’s own views; in particular, the final chapter of the text, titled ‘The Ideal’ (Stebbing’s own frequent use of the word ‘ideal’, outlined in the next section, may itself suggest evidence of influence, albeit under a different description than that used by Moore). There, Moore emphasizes the inherent *complexity* of what he calls “human intercourse” – that is, the interactions and relationships between individuals that make up human life. He writes, for example, that “It is obvious that … that the study of what is valuable in human intercourse is a study of immense complexity.” (*PE* 253) It is for this reason that Moore criticizes moral philosophers who attempt to impose unity, simplicity, or systematicity onto ethics; those who assume, in other words, that “the Universe is such that ethical truths must display … symmetry” (*PE* 270) – that is, the kind of symmetry or uniformity we expect to find in the sciences.[[24]](#endnote-24) Again, this fuels his criticism of moral philosophers who seek “one single criterion of right or wrong.” In the same chapter, Moore also puts forward his own version of the claim that moral philosophy ought to deal in *particulars.* He argues that moral philosophers are typically too quick to raise broad, conceptual questions like “what things are virtues or duties[?],” without, as he puts it, “distinguishing what these terms mean.” (*PE* 271) Instead of *starting* with such broad, general questions, Moore argues, we should start by identifying those things which *are* good/ bad or right/ wrong and *then* work out what, if anything, they have in common.[[25]](#endnote-25)

These aspects of Moore’s view are consistent with, for example, Stebbing’s own reasons for rejecting the hedonist/ utilitarian reductive definition of ‘good’. As we outlined above, reducing goodness down to one simple natural property like pleasure will inevitably result in what Stebbing calls an ‘isolate’. And while such isolates – generalizations or universal laws – may be applicable in the sciences, there is no place for them when it comes to understanding moral situations which are intrinsically complex. Stebbing and Moore are consistent, then, in their methodological critique of attempts to employ reductions, simplifications, or what Stebbing calls ‘isolates’ to understand moral situations (or what Moore calls “human intercourse”).

However, Stebbing does not subscribe wholeheartedly to Moore’s approach to ethics. Most importantly, despite his insistence that we start with particular observations about what *is* bad/good or right/ wrong, Moore’s treatment of ethics – and fundamental ethical questions like “What is good? and What is bad?” (*PE* 55) – remains at the level of an *abstract* discussion. In other words, Moore’s treatment of these questions in *Principia Ethica* plays out with virtually no reference to the ways that people live or the peculiar details of actual human lives. This is no coincidence, since Moore argues that

There are far too many persons, things and events in the world, past, present, or to come, for discussion of their individual merits to be embraced in any science. Ethics, therefore, does not deal at all with facts of this nature, facts that are unique, individual, absolutely particular; facts with which studies as history, geography, astronomy, are compelled, in part at least, to deal. And, for this reason, it is not the business of the ethical philosopher to give personal advice or exhortation. (*PE* 55)

Consider, for instance, a conceptual tool that is frequently used throughout *Principia Ethica*:Moore’s “method of absolute isolation.” (*PE* 237) This thought experiment involves taking an object, action, or state of affairs that is under consideration and determining whether, if that thing existed “*by themselves,* in absolute isolation,” we would judge them to be good (*PE* 236). Moore argues repeatedly that by considering things in this way, we can determine whether certain things really are good or bad. But, of course, this is not an empirical method, and the judgements arrived at do not require any consideration of the actual ways that people live or ways in which ‘human intercourse’ plays out. Moore’s method in the *Principia* thus involves a great deal of abstract theorizing – even if he is keen to avoid generalizations, simplifications, and reductive explanations.

We have seen already that, according to Stebbing, “to think in abstractions, when one’s concern is moral philosophy, is to fail as a philosopher.” (*I&I* 10) And there are further signs that Stebbing sought to distance herself from this kind of abstract moral theorizing*.* For instance, it’s worth comparing the ways that both Moore and Stebbing tackle the question of whether ‘good’ should be considered a noun or an adjective. Moore writes:

I suppose it may be granted that ‘good’ is an adjective. Well ‘the good’, ‘that which is good’ must therefore be the substantive to which the adjective ‘good’ will apply; it must be the whole of that to which the adjective will apply, and the adjective must *always* truly apply to it. But if it is that to which the adjective will apply, it must be something different from that adjective itself[.] (*PE* 60–61)

Moore’s claim is that ‘good’ *can* be considered an adjective, but only if there is also a “substantive”–an entity picked out by a noun–that it refers to. Consider, in contrast, Stebbing’s words from *Ideals and Illusions*: “We must think in adjectives, not in capitalized abstract nouns.” (*I&I* 79) Elsewhere in her writing, Stebbing cautions against committing what she calls the “fallacy of the substantive” (Stebbing, “Some Discussions”, 116): the mistake of inferring that every noun picks out a substantive entity. It seems likely that Stebbing has in mind the same fallacy here–and note that Moore himself even uses the term “substantive.” This suggests an important point of departure from Moorean meta-ethics and one which, we will suggest in the next section, brings her closer to the naturalist approach of later neo-Aristotelians.

The general picture that emerged from section one was that, for Stebbing, moral philosophy had become too abstract, too science-like. Moral philosophers have pre-occupied themselves with analyzing ethical *statements,* rather than ethical situations, in attempting to formulate universal ethical laws. What now seems likely is that Stebbing would have concluded that Moore is *also* guilty of dealing with ethics too abstractedly. Moore is categorical in stating that ethics “does not deal *at all* with facts ... that are unique, individual, absolutely particular.” (*PE* 55, emphasis added) And moral philosophers are not in the business of giving “personal advice or exhortation.” In contrast, Stebbing argues that in moral philosophy,

What we have to take account of is a whole mode of acting; ethical principles have a significance only in so far as they are closely related to a certain set of actions which proceed from a spirit that inspires a particular way of life[.] (*MMP* 17)

And a little later in *Men and Moral Principles*:

We cannot by merely thinking, however brilliantly, solve any problems at all, for thought alone deals only with abstracta. It is as useless as it is profoundly unphilosophical to formulate moral ideals without taking note of the manner of men we are. Whatever may be the case with politicians making week-end speeches in time of war, philosophers cannot afford to ignore the conditions of the problems set by the situations in which we live. (*MMP* 18–19)

It is difficult not to think of Moore’s abstract ‘method of absolute isolation’ – of *deliberately* conceiving of things abstracted from the context of their real existence to evaluate their goodness or badness – when reading Stebbing’s warning that “We cannot by merely thinking, however brilliantly, solve any problems at all.” It also appears likely that Stebbing’s thinking here was influenced by what was going on around her in Europe during the War. The most important question – *the* fundamental question of ethics – for Stebbing, is not ‘What is good?’ but rather ‘How ought we to live our lives and what are the ideals we ought to live by?’ As she puts it: “Moral philosophers, I contend, must be concerned with the ways in which men live.” (*MMP* 4)

It should now be clear that, while there are important similarities between Stebbing’s and Moore’s critiques of simplifying and reductive tendencies in moral philosophy, Stebbing’s account of the correct methodology of ethics also diverges from Moore in a significant way: ethics should not deal with *abstracta* but particulars – not just particular things (conceived, abstractedly, from their real existence) but *particular ways of living*. For this reason, while Stebbing may have ‘found help’ in Moore, we should also think of her as having developed a targeted criticism of him too. This may explain why Stebbing *also* looked to Aristotle for help. We discuss the degree to which Stebbing’s moral philosophy might be thought of as ‘Aristotelian’ in the next section.

3.2 Stebbing’s Aristotelianism

We now turn to Stebbing’s positive ethical and meta-ethical commitments. In this subsection, we argue that, together, Stebbing’s *Ideals and Illusions* and *Men and Moral Principles* constitute an attempt to revive a form of Aristotelian ethics. Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958), which connects ethical theorizing to human nature and character traits, is typically seen as a catalyst in the re-emergence of Aristotelian ethics, including (first level) virtue ethics and the (second level) meta-ethical position known as ‘neo-Aristotelian naturalism’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Yet, Stebbing, we here argue, can be thought of as having already attempted to revive Aristotelian ethics over a decade prior.[[27]](#endnote-27) This is consistent, we argue, with the idea that Stebbing’s view *also* ‘found help’ in Moore. Indeed, one might think of Stebbing as identifying those points on which Moore and Aristotle (and the wider Aristotelian tradition) are in agreement.

There are three aspects of Stebbing’s positive ethical view that we will draw attention to in this section. First, Stebbing’s claim that moral philosophy ought to concern itself with ways of living or what she calls ‘ideals’, which we touched on above. We connect Stebbing’s notion of an ‘ideal’ to her insistence that humans ought to cultivate certain character traits or ‘spiritual excellences’, and her view that the best ideals are those that will lead us to spiritual contentment or happiness. We also offer reasons to think that Stebbing endorses Aristotle’s conception of proper pleasure and that her focus on spiritual contentment deliberately evokes his notion of *eudaimonia*. Second, we examine Stebbing’s account of those things which constitute intrinsic goods – that is, the kinds of things which are “worth while for [their] own sake.” (*I&I* 29–30) We argue that Stebbing’s account of *which* things are intrinsically good is consistent with Moore, but that her method of *identifying* those intrinsic goods is Aristotelian. Third, we examine Stebbing’s ‘meta-ethical’ position and argue that it centers around a teleological and moralized conception of human nature which is structurally akin to that defended by later twentieth-century neo-Aristotelian naturalists like Philippa Foot.

In a manner reminiscent of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* 1094a), Stebbing begins *Ideals and Illusions* by considering the proper ends or goals of human life. She asks: “What do we believe to be the ends for which it is worthwhile to live?” (*I&I* 8) In determining these ends, Stebbing argues, we must first make explicit the ways of life–or the “ideals”–which we live by. Making clear our ideals will, in turn, make clear that which “bring us inward peace–that is, happiness.” (*I&I* 8) ‘Ideals’ are an important notion in Stebbing’s ethics and it’s worth pausing to clarify her use of the term before continuing.

An ideal, for Stebbing, is not a set of maxims or abstract principles, nor is it a (potentially unachievable) utopian doctrine. An ideal is a set of concrete reasons which jointly provide an answer to the question, “What is worth having in such and such specifiable circumstances?” (*I&I* 10) As she puts it in *Men and Moral Principles,* an ideal is “a conception of a way of living that is judged to be good.” (*MMP* 20). In the context of wartime Europe, Stebbing had in mind ideals such as pacifism, egalitarianism, democracy, and even Nazism. While it might sound strange to describe Nazism as an ‘ideal’, this is consistent with Stebbing’s use of the term since it was, after all, judged to be good by its proponents.

For Stebbing, the first step to determining the proper ends of human life is to identify the ideals currently being endorsed – and Stebbing clearly thinks there is usually more than one ideal at play in any given society. As we saw above, Stebbing states that: “Moral philosophers must be concerned with the ways in which men live – their ways of life which embody their ideals.” (*MMP* 4) Moral philosophers must discover ideals present in their society and clarify exactly what “principles” these ideals may recommend (*MMP* 40). In deciding between ideals, Stebbing outlines her reasoning as follows:

Each ideal, if it were put into practice, would promote, or at least tend to promote, the development of a certain type of man and would be inimical to the development of some other types … we must compare these types of men seeking to discover which holds the greatest promise of developing into the sort of person we believe a human being is capable of becoming. (*MMP* 25)

However, it is not enough that moral philosophers be directed at simply identifying pre-existing ideals. If a moral philosopher discovers a society full of ideals that are not worthwhile, or are morally repugnant, it is also their job to “formulate [new] ideals worth living for” (*MMP* 40) (again, one can see how WW2 led Stebbing to this position). Such ideals should be “better than the actual state of affairs and not remote from the conditions of human life.” (*I&I* 4)

Once moral philosophers have brought to light existing ideals or formulated new ones, what will emerge, Stebbing claims, is an answer to the question with which *Ideals and Illusions* began, namely, the question of which ends it is worth living for. And Stebbing thinks the answer will be clear: the most worthwhile end is happiness. The best ideals will tend to promote “the sort of person we believe a human being is capable of becoming”; a person that fulfils their potential as a human being – in other words, the standard set before them by their nature (*I&I* 4).

Stebbing’s claims about the connection between *happiness* and moral activity mark out her view as Aristotelian. At the beginning of *Ideals and Illusions,* she explains that once we have clarified our ideals, “we should have set clearly before our minds what it is we most deeply desire, the attaining of which would bring us inward peace – that is, happiness.” (*I&I* 8) Stebbing maintains that such happiness will in turn provide us with a kind of knowledge, in the form of a feeling of internal harmony; knowledge that what we are pursuing in our day-to-day lives really is *worthwhile*. What is important to note is that on this view, happiness (like goodness) is not something reducible to pleasure in the hedonistic or bodily sense, it is a state of being that we attain through living the right kind of life as a human being. Happiness, Stebbing tells us, is promoted indirectly, through the pursuit of other more immediate ends. In Stebbing’s words,

Happiness is not an end to be chosen *instead* of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness; it is a character of experiences of knowing something to be true, contemplating something beautiful, fulfilling one’s duty. (*I&I* 79)

And:

Happiness is not an end to pursue; it is a sign, perhaps, that something worth while is being pursued, a characteristic of a state in which a human being’s capacities are being fulfilled. (*I&I* 79)

Here Stebbing argues that certain goals and activities, such as the appreciation of music or literature (to use her own examples (*I&I* 77)), are activities that bring us happiness and inner peace, but this is not the end that we seek when we engage in these activities. In other words, happiness is an end pursued for the sake of another end – it is a byproduct of worthwhile actions, for Stebbing.

An Aristotelian reading of Stebbing’s concept of happiness, as it has been presented so far, suggests something akin to how Aristotle understands ‘proper pleasure’, which accompanies but is not identical to *eudaimonia* (meaning flourishing or living well).[[28]](#endnote-28) Proper pleasure is distinct from *eudaimonia* insofar as proper pleasure is experienced when the virtuous person engages in activities done for their own sake, whereas *eudaimonia* is the highest good of human life, achieved through *overall* flourishing of the person’s life, in conformity with the practice of virtue (*NE*, 1.7).[[29]](#endnote-29) Proper pleasure, according to Aristotle, is not a kind of activity itself but rather a natural human state which *accompanies* various activities (*NE*, 1153b17–19). To use one of Stebbing’s examples (*I&I* 77), if I am listening to a piece of music and appreciating it appropriately, I will be in a state of proper pleasure. The pleasure of listening to music occurs simultaneously with the activity of listening and may complement the activity by encouraging me to refine and improve my listening skills. As Aristotle writes (in Ross’ translation), proper pleasure “supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age.” (NE, 1174b33) But importantly for Aristotle, proper pleasure is not an end pursued for itself.

Similarly, Stebbing claims that we do not pursue happiness (read: pleasure) as an end. Instead, she maintains, happiness accompanies those activities that fulfil our capacities as human beings. It is not something to be pursued (in itself) but rather a “sign” that “something worth while is being pursued.” (*I&I* 79)[[30]](#endnote-30) Whether Stebbing has Aristotle’s idea of pleasure or *eudaimonia* in mind, it is clear that she agrees with his claim that they both accompany but also occur *independently* from the pursuit of everyday ends (such as truth, beauty and goodness) and are achieved when we pursue worthwhile ends. She also presents ‘happiness’ as evaluative and moralized, not merely descriptive of a given state of mind. In other words, a “way of life” is worthwhile only if it contains happiness – an idea that clearly evokes the Aristotelian notion of the good life as the *eudaimonic* life (*NE* 1095a16).[[31]](#endnote-31) This is an idea that is also commonplace in later virtue ethicist conceptions of happiness.[[32]](#endnote-32)

What should be clear so far is that, while Stebbing may not offer a full-blooded conception of happiness in the *eudaimonic* senseas the ultimate end of all human life and action, she does offer Aristotelian resources to achieve human flourishing including an account of proper pleasure and – as we argue below – a conception of virtues (‘spiritual excellences’) and a normative, teleological conception of human nature as offering a standard against we judge human goodness.

So, what kind of ends ought we to pursue if we are to “fulfil our capacities as a human being” according to Stebbing? Aristotle famously tackles this question by appealing to what he deems the proper *ergon*, or function, of human nature. In his view, our function consists only in the proper exercise of the distinctly human capacity for *reason*, in accordance with certain character dispositions known as ‘virtues’ (*NE* 1097b22–1098a20). At least part of Stebbing’s own answer to this question can be found in the fundamental distinction she draws between humans and non-human animals which, as it does for Aristotle, hinges on the uniquely human possession of an intellect – or what she calls the “spiritual soul”. And, again, as it does for Aristotle, for Stebbing, human flourishing depends on that which makes us distinctly human. As she puts it in *Ideals and Illusions*:

human beings have spiritual needs. These are the needs that differentiate men from other animals; if they are left unsatisfied, then men are nothing other than animals … The enjoying of art and beauty in nature is specifically human. Those who experience such states of mind know them to be without qualification good. (*I&I* 87–88)

Human spirituality, for Stebbing, is notably not a supernatural or religious notion.She employs a secular approach which encompasses that which she sees as distinctively human.[[33]](#endnote-33) As she writes in her 1939 paper “Ethics and Materialism”:

Those who do not believe in a life beyond or in a supernatural goal must not be assumed to have no sense of spiritual values. By spiritual values I mean intellectual and moral excellences, including love for human beings and respect for truth. (Stebbing, “Ethics and Materialism”, 43)[[34]](#endnote-34)

If flourishing consists in the proper exercise of distinctly human capacities (as quoted above, happiness for Stebbing is a “state in which a human being’s capacities are being fulfilled”), then on Stebbing’s view, human happiness consists in that which separates us from the animals: the exercise of “spiritual values” – namely intellectual and moral excellences.

Spiritual excellences, both moral and intellectual, are a kind of character trait for Stebbing, comparable to moral and intellectual ‘virtues’ in Aristotle. Though she does not use the word ‘virtue’, Stebbing offers examples of spiritual excellences that sound very much like examples of virtuous character traits:

love for human beings, delight in creative activities of all kinds, respect for truth, satisfaction in learning to know what is true about this world (which includes ourselves), loyalty to other human beings, generosity of thought and sympathy with those who suffer, hatred of cruelty and other evils, devotion to duty and steadfastness in seeking one’s ideals, delight in the beauty of nature and in art – in short, the love and pursuit of what is worth while for its own sake. (*I&I* 29–30)

Here, traits like respect, loyalty, devotion, and sympathy are positioned as intrinsic goods; excellences of character *without which* a human life cannot be judged good or “worth while”. Stebbing also explicitly positions the pursuit of *ideals* as a kind of spiritual excellence, suggesting that a good life is one lived in the *active* pursuit of something we deem to be good.

Stebbing goes on to suggest that any human life found to be “lacking” intellectual and moral excellences would not be a good life – in Stebbing’s words, such a life would be “nasty and brutish.” (*I&I* 29)[[35]](#endnote-35) Like Aristotle, Stebbing thinks certain minimal conditions are necessary in order to develop intellectual virtues, while conditions of deprivation (or “unspiritual” conditions) limit an individual’s excellences to those of the moral character (e.g. hatred of cruelty). In one of Stebbing’s own examples, she questions how we might judge the life of a person confined to a crowded air-raid shelter who perishes before they are allowed to emerge. “The answer”, Stebbing tells us, “is clearly that [such a life] would not be worthwhile.” (*I&I* 32)

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also makes it clear that certain goods, beyond the moral and intellectual virtues, are necessary to flourish. Without some measure of wealth, friendship, and health, Aristotle points out that an individual may not find ample opportunity to habituate their virtues sufficiently and hence happiness may be severely diminished (*NE* 1099a31–b6). This may be what Stebbing has in mind in her example of the air raid shelter. Without the opportunity to practice aesthetic excellences of the intellect, like “delight in the beauty of nature and in art”, a person is unlikely to attain true happiness (*I&I* 29–30). Evidence for such a view can be found elsewhere in *Ideals and Illusions,* such as when Stebbing considers a life lived enjoying only the amusement proper to a child, lacking any intellectual pursuits. As Stebbing sees it, someone who lived such a life would “not behave in a manner fitted for a being who is capable of diverse activities.” (*I&I* 86)

Clearly, one reason a life might be judged not to be worthwhile would be if it were *deprived* of spiritual excellence. But for Stebbing there is a second way human life can be deemed bad, namely by possessing what she calls “spiritual evils.” (*I&I* 70) Stebbing lists traits which she states include “nothing that is not without qualification evil”:

Anything that hinders or makes impossible a right relationship between people: hatred of anyone; delight in the suffering of anyone, including deliberate cruelty; obtaining power over anyone and exercising it for his hurt; unkindness (i.e. a milder form of cruelty) in all its various forms, including insensitiveness to other people’s needs; using people exclusively for my own aims, as though they were things and thus without regard to their being also persons; indifference of truth; lack of self-control; fear. These are in my opinion indubitably spiritual evils. (*I&I* 70)

Again, while she does not use the term, it seems likely that what Stebbing is offering here is a list of bad character traits known as ‘vices’ – counterpoints to the spiritual excellences (or ‘virtues’) that the right kind of ideal will cultivate in a person.

With Stebbing’s broadly Aristotelian approach to character traits in mind, one might wonder *why* she thinks we ought to cultivate spiritual excellences, or what the end of doing so is. On our reading of Stebbing, there is a clear answer. Through the successful cultivation of spiritual excellences and pursuit of certain ends (such as truth, beauty, aesthetic pleasure) we can pursue the “deepest desire” of happiness. For Stebbing, it is paramount that ethics does not focus on identifying ‘the Good’ or ‘the Right’ as what she calls a “singular capitalized noun.” (*I&I* 79) Instead, for Stebbing, ethics should be concerned with identifying concrete instances in which we attain happiness, deeming it “important to ask ourselves on what different sorts of occasions we have been happy.” (*I&I* 89) Doing so, she thinks, is akin to thinking in *adjectives* that describe ways of living (rather than nouns).

At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves that Stebbing claims to have ‘found help’ not just in Aristotle but also in Moore, whose influence is once again discernible in the kinds of ‘ideals’ that Stebbing conceives of as leading to ‘spiritual contentment’. In various places throughout *Ideals and Illusions* and *Men and Moral Principles,* Stebbing promotes appreciation of beauty, nature, and art as intrinsic goods*.* Here, she agrees with Moore who writes (for example) that

By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and *the enjoyment of beautiful objects.* No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and *the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature,* are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having purely for their own sakes, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has nearly so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads*.* (*PE* 237, our emphasis)

Stebbing and Moore’s conception of what things are intrinsically good clearly coincide. Like Moore, Stebbing thinks we should pursue “delight in the beauty of nature and in art.” (*I&I* 29–30) Such delight, she claims, is “worth while for its own sake”.

However, while she might agree with Moore’s claims about *which* goods are worthwhile for their own sake, she *disagrees* with his account of how we *identify* those goods. As we established in 3.1, Stebbing objects to the idea that ‘goods’ or ‘ideals’ can be identified in abstraction from the “ways of living” in which they occur. Identifying, for instance, the appreciation of nature as an intrinsic good, for Stebbing, is necessarily connected to the cultivation of spiritual excellences. Further, given Stebbing’s views on the complexity of moral situations, identifying those goods and their connection to such excellences is not going to be something that can be discerned *in abstraction* from such situations. Again, this is a clear departure from Moore’s “method of absolute isolation.” (*PE* 237)

To further motivate our reading of Stebbing as an ‘Aristotelian’ (albeit a form of Aristotelian that finds *some* help in Moore) it is also worth considering Stebbing’s claim about spiritual excellences in relation to her claims about what is wrong with a lot of the moral philosophy going on around her that we discussed in section two. As we outlined previously, for Stebbing no universal moral law can be constructed which will tell an individual whether, for example, keeping a promise will be the right thing to do in a given situation. Rather, it is “the whole situation” which determines the moral value of an action. There is a distinctly Aristotelian dimension to the claim that certain actions are good and bad (or evil) only in relation to certain specific circumstances. Many modern virtue ethicists focus on the way that Aristotle's notion of *phronesis,* meaning moral or practical wisdom, displays a similar appreciation of moral *situations* as we have drawn out in Stebbing’s ethics. According to Aristotle, there is only one course of action which can be judged correct in a given circumstance, and this is the action done by the virtuous person.

But it is notable that, for Stebbing, it will turn out that certain dispositions or character traits are good or bad in *every* situation and, hence, that her ethics constitutes a form of moral objectivism. To use an example found in *Men and Moral Principles,* Stebbing writes, “I should myself say that it follows from the judgement that Cruelty is evil that under all circumstances and in all conditions to act cruelly is evil.” (*MMP* 13) The judgement ‘Cruelty is evil’ cannot follow “merely from the fact that what is predicated of something is that it is *evil*.” (*MMP* 13, emphasis in original) The statement ‘Cruelty is evil’, can only be made by considering the complex elements of the situation including, for Stebbing, “enjoyment in witnessing or inflicting pain on other sentient beings.” (*MMP* 13)

To close this section, we will connect some of Stebbing’s meta-ethical claims with the contemporary meta-ethical program known as ‘neo-Aristotelian naturalism’. Neo-Aristotelian naturalism, like virtue ethics, is typically associated with developments in moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century but is distinct from virtue ethics because of the *level* of theorizing that takes place. While the virtue ethicist is concerned with the first level axiological questions such as ‘which virtues ought I cultivate?’, in contrast, neo-Aristotelian naturalists are concerned with the second level question of *why* we ought to cultivate these virtues and what grounds our claims about them.[[36]](#endnote-36) While Stebbing makes few explicit claims of this meta-ethical nature, it is possible to draw out some connections between her meta-ethical views, and those espoused by neo-Aristotelian naturalists who came after her.

A common thread amongst many proponents of neo-Aristotelian naturalism is an attempt to ground ethics in a conception of human nature. As Jennifer Frey puts it, Neo-Aristotelians broadly include “those moral philosophers convinced that ethics is, to some extent, grounded in claims about human nature, where human nature is understood in a broadly Aristotelian vein”.[[37]](#endnote-37) By ‘Aristotelian vein’ Frey is referring to the idea, touched upon above, that human nature is a normative concept against which the lives of individuals are assessed as going well or badly. She may also be referring to the Aristotelian notion that human nature resides in that which separates us from the animals (i.e. rationality, for Aristotle). According to many Neo-Aristotelians, a good person is only good *qua* human and hence, there must be something that it is to be human, according to this meta-ethical view.[[38]](#endnote-38)

There is strong evidence that Stebbing also conceives of human nature as a normative concept. First, she thinks that there are certain traits, natural and spiritual, common to all humans. She writes:

human beings each need conditions which are the same for all – for example, food, water, warmth, play, loving and being loved, and so on, indefinitely but not infinitely[[39]](#endnote-39) ... Human beings resemble each other; we are members of the same kind or sort. Consequently, we often do find the same things to be important, finding ourselves in the same sort of situation. (*I&I* 91–92)

Clearly, for Stebbing, there is something it is like to be a human being – something we share as the kinds of creatures that we are. Second, Stebbing suggests that out of these shared facts about human nature it is possible to derive non-reductive normative conclusions. As we mentioned above, on Stebbing’s view, happiness (the most worthwhile end of human life for Stebbing) cannot be reduced so something else, meaning it does not consist in the mere satisfaction of felt bodily wants, or impulses. She denies, for instance, the claim that our so-called “natural impulses” have normative value in and of themselves. As she puts it, “It is a mistake to suppose that all that is needed for happiness is that we be allowed to follow our natural impulses.” (*I&I* 122–23) In other words, Stebbing rejects reductive accounts of happiness, claiming that normative conclusions cannot be derived directly from facts about an individual’s pleasure or impulse. As Stebbing puts it, “Human nature is not so simple; an impulse in itself is neither good nor bad. It is from the manner of their coordination that goodness and badness arise.” (*I&I* 123) This ‘coordination’ between our impulses presumably refers to our broader nature – that which we share with beings of our kind, and that which (for Neo-Aristotelian naturalists) determines whether we can be said to be flourishing as the kind of being we are. As such, Stebbing seems to suggest that once human nature is conceptualized as complex, assessments of goodness and badness can “arise”. Notably, for most Neo-Aristotelians, our flourishing also necessarily involves the cultivation of certain virtues, something which we’ve argued can also be found in Stebbing.

What we find in Stebbing’s ethical writings, we have shown, are some important similarities with both Aristotle and later neo-Aristotelians. Specifically, while she does not explicitly delineate them herself, we have provided evidence of a commitment to both (a) first level axiological commitments that closely resemble the views of virtue ethicists and (b) second level, meta-ethical commitments that are consistent with the views of contemporary Neo-Aristotelian naturalists. And, while Stebbing evidently also ‘found help’ in Moore, we do not think these findings are inconsistent – in fact, Stebbing can be thought of as having identified (and endorsed) those aspects of Moore ethics which are consistent with Aristotle.

4. Macdonald’s objection

Before concluding, we outline an objection to Stebbing’s account of what moral philosophy ought to look like that is raised by Margaret Macdonald in her 1945 review of *Men and Moral Principles.* We do so for two reasons. First, because, as is often the case with a good objection, by critiquing Stebbing’s view Macdonald helps clarify the precise shape of it. Second, because we think Macdonald’s concerns support our contention that Stebbing is defending a broadly Aristotelian approach to moral theorizing. We also provide a reconstruction of how Stebbing might have responded to Macdonald.[[40]](#endnote-40) Macdonald’s objection is as follows (we cite the passage in full before unpacking it):

Unfortunately, Miss Stebbing leaves unexplained the principle upon which the choice between different ideals is to be determined. She gives a hint on page 25 when she suggests that our choice should be guided by “the sort of person we believe a human being is capable of becoming.” This, however, is too vague to be very useful. An analogy with medical and other professional codes, too, is misleading. We know, and could describe fairly adequately, what constitutes being a good doctor, a good lawyer, a good carpenter, even a good trade unionist or a good employer. But can we, in an analogous sense, describe what it is to be a good human being? Moreover, what men are capable of becoming seems to be a scientific question. The philosopher has no qualifications for answering it. Biologists, physiologists, psychologists, historians and sociologists may be able to predict how man can develop. But he may develop bad characteristics as easily as good. Which characteristics do we want to develop, and why? Is there an ideal human personality which all should develop? (Macdonald 1945, 77–78)[[41]](#endnote-41)

Macdonald’s concern, we take it, is as follows: according to Stebbing, moral philosophers are in the game of identifying ideals, ways of living that should be followed and discouraging those which should not (e.g., *MMP* 4). For Stebbing, for example, it is the job of the moral philosopher to show that Nazism is not the kind of ideal that should be followed. For Stebbing, the right kind of ideals are those which enable us to become the sort of person that we ought to be – to use Aristotelian terminology, ideals are ways of living that promote human flourishing.

But Macdonald points out that there is no clear metric for discerning which ideals are good ideals and which are not. Similarly, there is no obvious metric for working out what it means to be a good human being. For that reason, according to Macdonald, the case of a ‘good human being’ is disanalogous to examples like a good doctor, lawyer, or carpenter. Presumably, Macdonald has in mind the fact that in all these other cases, whether one is ‘good’ at what they are doing can be determined by the results of their activities. A good doctor will help improve their patients’ health. A good lawyer will win cases. A good carpenter will produce good woodwork. But there is no such consensus on what makes a human being ‘good.’ If there were such a consensus, one might think, then clashes of ideals – of the kind manifested in Europe in the 1930/40s – would be rare, if not non-existent. An ideal, for Stebbing, is “a conception of a way of living that is judged to be good” (*MMP* 20). But the question remains how we know, or work out, who has judged rightly or wrongly. Stebbing clearly believes that Nazis have judged wrongly, they have opted for the wrong ideal, but it is not obvious what justifies this belief.

As Macdonald argues, many of us would most likely share Stebbing’s view that Nazism is wrong. What’s more, many of us would agree that we do not arrive at this view based on mere custom or personal preference, that is, that there is a fact of the matter such that it is true to say: ‘Nazism is wrong.’ As Macdonald puts it, “We do not believe that it is merely preference for our own customs which makes us condemn as immoral the beliefs and practices of some societies.” (*MMP* 78) But, according to Macdonald, Stebbing has not done enough to demonstrate what makes that the case, or to justify a commitment to the view that the proposition ‘Nazism is wrong’ is true in any factual or robust sense. In order to hold on to this commitment – that it is *true* that ‘Nazism is wrong’ – and, relatedly, the idea that certain ideals are *right* in their recommendations about how we ought to live, it looks like Stebbing must believe that there is, as Siobhan Chapman puts it, some “absolute ideal by which standards of society can be judged.”[[42]](#endnote-42) But a commitment to some absolute ideal “seems to introduce a purely metaphysical notion which in her concrete and practical mood she [Stebbing] would emphatically reject” (Macdonald, “Men and Moral Principles”, 78). Introducing the notion of an absolute ideal or ‘Good’ would also threaten to undermine her rejection of *abstract* moral theorizing.

How might Stebbing respond to this objection? More specifically, how might she have attempted to hold on to the idea that some ideals are preferable to others (and that it is the moral philosopher’s job to identify those worth living by) without committing herself to an *absolute ideal* with which to compare them?

One course of action, for Stebbing, would be to appeal to the idea of spiritual excellences. We saw in section three that Stebbing characterizes spiritual excellences as “intellectual and moral capacities lacking which the life of human beings would be nasty and brutish.” (*I&I* 29) We also suggested that Stebbing’s spiritual excellences can be thought of in much the same way that virtues are in the Aristotelian tradition. A good human being, Stebbing would argue, is one who exhibits spiritual excellences, like “love for human beings and respect for truth,” (Stebbing, “Ethics and Materialism”, 43) while a bad human being is one who exhibits “spiritual evils”, vices like “delight in the suffering of anyone” or “deliberate cruelty.” (*I&I* 70) Similarly, a good *ideal* is one that promotes spiritual excellences and discourages spiritual evils, while a bad ideal (like Nazism) does the opposite.

This kind of response is consistent with Stebbing’s views as espoused in both *Ideals and Illusions* and *Men and Moral Principles*. But is it a satisfying response? It seems unlikely that it would satisfy a critic like Macdonald, who may well see this kind of reply as simply kicking the can a little further down the road. After all, the question remains how we know which character traits count as spiritual excellences (or virtues) and which count as spiritual evils (or vices). Again, there is no denying that Stebbing’s examples of virtues and vices sound intuitively plausible, but if one were to look for agreement from individuals living by alternative ideals (fascists and Nazis, for example) one would be unlikely to find it. As Macdonald points out, humans “may develop bad characteristics as easily as good.” (Macdonald, “Men and Moral Principles”, 78) The history of humanity is full of examples of what many of us would think of as examples of bad (or vicious) actions. In which case, the question arises whether it is really plausible to suggest that what is *good* is what is natural. Thus, it looks as though, once again, Stebbing has either failed to justify the claim that there is some fact of the matter about which ideals are preferable or that she is, in Macdonald’s words, reliant on there being some “absolute ideal by which the standards of different groups and societies should be judged.” (Macdonald, “Men and Moral Principles”, 78)

Does the potential intractability of the problem raised in Macdonald’s objection undermine the significance, whether historical or philosophical, of Stebbing’s ethical writings? We do not think so. What we find in Stebbing’s final published writings is a clear attempt to instigate a paradigm shift in the methodology of analytic moral philosophy. Instead of an approach to moral philosophy that seeks to identify universal laws or ‘isolates’ (as she thinks, e.g. utilitarians and deontologists seek to do), Stebbing promotes an approach on which moral philosophers are in the business of identifying ways of living, rather than abstract or universal moral principles. What’s more, Stebbing clearly sought to preserve the meaningfulness – and truth value – of ethical judgements, in the face of linguistic philosophy and logical positivism. Moreover, as we argued in section 3.2, in doing so, Stebbing sought to revive a form of Aristotelian ethics. Indeed, the concern that Macdonald raises for Stebbing is a familiar problem for the Aristotelian ethicist: it’s all well and good to claim that a good life is one that is constituted of virtuous behavior but who gets to say which kinds of character traits are, and are not, virtuous?[[43]](#endnote-43)

Ultimately, we think, Stebbing’s attempt to revive a form of Aristotelian ethics is of great historicalimportance. Prior to both the emergence of virtue ethics as a mainstream (first level) normative position and the emergence of neo-Aristotelian naturalism in meta-ethical debates in the second half of the twentieth century, Stebbing was calling for a return of moral theorizing that focused on ways of living, not abstract or universal moral principles. Thus, while Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” was no doubt more widely read than Stebbing’s ethical writings (and thus more likely to have influenced subsequent thought), Stebbing can nonetheless be helpfully thought of as having attempted something similar – both in terms of her criticisms of mainstream analytic moral philosophy and her attempt to reinstate an approach to ethics grounded in character traits and ways of living – over ten years prior. Once again, it turns out that a close inspection of Stebbing’s writing reveals her to be an important figure in the history of twentieth century philosophy in Britain.[[44]](#endnote-44)

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1. We use the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘moral philosophy’ interchangeably in this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. Janssen-Lauret, *Susan Stebbing,* and Beaney and Chapman, ‘Susan Stebbing.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, it was Stebbing who invited key members of the Vienna Circle, like Carnap and Schlick, to give talks in Britain for the first time. It was at one such talk that A. J. Ayer met Carnap and was introduced to Logical Positivism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. An exception is Chapman, *Susan Stebbing.* Chapman discusses both *Ideals and Illusions* and *Men and Moral Principles* and helpfully situates them both in the context of Stebbing’s life and her other works. However, Chapman’s aims are primarily biographical, and the task remains to reconstruct Stebbing’s moral philosophy and characterize what kind of ethical position it is that Stebbing is defending. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Chapman, *Susan Stebbing*, 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for their suggestions about how to frame and phrase our presentation of Stebbing’s relation to later Aristotelian ethicists. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Other philosophers typically associated with the neo-Aristotelian movement include Elizabeth Anscombe, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum and Mary Midgley (see Robson, ‘Mary Midgley’s Meta-ethics’). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Macdonald went on to be another prominent figure in early–to mid-twentieth century British philosophy. For instance, after WW2, she was editor of *Analysis.* For further discussion of Macdonald’s philosophy and place in the early analytic tradition, see, e.g., Kremer, ‘A Philosophical Friendship’; Misak, ‘Ryle’s Deby’; and Kremer and Misak, *Margaret Macdonald*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Similarly, in his ‘Reflections Occasioned by *Ideals and Illusions*’ from a 1948 collection *Philosophical Studies: Essays in Memory of L. Susan Stebbing* produced by members of the Aristotelian Society, John Laird writes that Stebbing “was bent upon helping the lives, through the minds, of her contemporaries” and “whose zest for principle invariably had the purpose of social betterment” (Laird, ‘Reflections’, 20). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, Stebbing used her connections to the Kingsley Lodge School in London and Bedford College to help house refugees from Nazi occupied countries in the build-up to WW2 (Chapman, *Susan Stebbing*, 126). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is also worth noting that most influential form of intuitionism in the late 1930s and early 40s – articulated by W.D Ross in *The Right and the Good* (1930) —likely had an influence on Stebbing’s critique of modern moral philosophy. In this sense, Stebbing shouldn’t be seen to reject intuitionism in its entirety. As we outline below, it is possible that Stebbing and Ross would reject the methods of deontologists and utilitarians on similar grounds. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Stebbing explains that her understanding of Wittgenstein’s method (in 1933) is derived from thinkers like Schlick, Carnap, Waismann, and Neurath (Stebbing, ‘Logical Postivism and Analysis’, 53-54). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935,* edited by Alice Ambrose (another of Wittgenstein’s students), was based upon lecture notes made by both Ambrose and Macdonald (Ambrose, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures*, xi). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Stebbing’s notion of ‘directional analysis’ can be construed as an attempt to demonstrate that philosophical analysis is about more than just clarifying our use of certain terms; for Stebbing, ‘directional’ analysis could result in genuine insights about the world around us. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Stebbing seems to be defending a position similar to what is known as moral *particularism* in contemporary moral philosophy. In the words of Jonathan Dancy, particularism is the view that “there are no defensible moral principles, that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases, and that the morally perfect person should not be conceived as the person of principle” (Dancy, ‘Moral Particularism’). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Moore is a first level ‘ideal’ utilitarian, according to Ross, insofar as he maintains that the right action is the one that will generate the greatest amount of intrinsic good, out of all the possible options. It is not clear that Stebbing would associate Moore with utilitarianism in this way. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Similarly, Ross supposes that Kant assumes that certain universal moral laws such as ‘lying is always wrong’ will capture all the morally relevant phenomena (Ross, *Foundations*, 189). He criticizes this view in *Foundations of Ethics,* noting that a “contest between one element which alone has worth and a multitude of others which have none; the truth rather is that it is a struggle between a multiplicity of desires having various degrees of worth” (Ross, *Foundations*, 206). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Skelton, ‘Ross.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Stebbing does not clarify what she takes Aristotle’s “blunder” to be, but it seems likely that she is alluding to his views on the inferiority and subjugation of women. *Men and Moral Principles* was first given as the Hobhouse Memorial Lecture and the irony of a woman like Stebbing finding “help” in Aristotle would not have been lost on such an audience. Aristotle’s views on women were discussed in Russell’s hugely popular *History of Western Philosophy,* also published in 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. E.g. Ayer, *Part,* 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. E.g. Stebbing ‘Moore’s Influence’, Connell and Janssen-Lauret ‘Bad philosophy,’ [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Janssen-Lauret ‘Stebbing’s Metaphysics’ & *Susan Stebbing*, esp. 2, 5–6, 11–12; see also Coliva, ‘Stebbing, Moore’, 1–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. As scholars like Connell and Janssen-Lauret, ‘Bad philosophy’, 244, and Sarah Hutton, ‘Women, philosophy’, have noted, this is part of a wider historical trend of scholars presenting women in philosophy as followers, disciples, or handmaidens to well-known ‘canonical’ men. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The specific reference to ‘symmetry’ here concerns the idea – which Moore criticizes other moral philosophers for assuming – that what is true of ‘goodness’ must also be true of ‘badness’. Moore’s approach of *first* studying those things which can be said to be good or bad, before addressing any broader questions about goodness or badness, leads him to conclude that pain is *not* “an evil of exactly the same magnitude as pleasure is good” (PE, 270). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Note, then, that while Moore starts his *Principia* with the broad question ‘What is good?’, he objects to inquiry that starts with analogous questions about ‘virtue’ or ‘duty’. While further discussion of this possible tension in Moore’s view goes beyond our current concerns, it suffices for now to note that this suggests he does *not* think that ‘being virtuous’ or ‘being dutiful’ are intrinsic properties of objects in the way that ‘Goodness’ is. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. The term ‘Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism’ was first coined by Hursthouse, ‘Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. This is not to say that Stebbing was *alone* is defending a form of Aristotelian ethics at this stage; and, indeed, the existence of other defences of Aristotelianism would further motivate applying scrutiny to the idea that it all started with Anscombe. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting to us this reading of Stebbing’s claims about happiness. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. For discussion of Aristotle’s distinction between pleasure and happiness, see Gurtler, ‘The Activity of Happiness’, and Kraut, *Aristotle*, particularly the Introduction. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. An anonymous referee raised the concern that Stebbing’s claim that happiness is the end of all moral action appears to undermine her rejection of universal moral principles. In other words, it would be a problem for Stebbing if (e.g.) ‘pursue happiness’ were supposed to be a codifiable principle that must be followed universally. However, as we have noted here, there is clear evidence that Stebbing does *not* think of happiness in this way. She explicitly states that “Happiness is not an end to pursue” (I&I 79). For Stebbing, happiness is more like a byproduct which results from our having performed certain good actions. Building on Stebbing’s claims about spiritual excellences (discussed below), one might read her as holding a similar view to Rosalind Hursthouse who maintains that virtuous character traits “generate a prescription—do what is honest, charitable, generous […] do not do what is dishonest, uncharitable, mean” without suggesting that such rules can be applied in the abstract, by the non-virtuous person, as suggested by the deontologist and utilitarian (Hursthouse, ‘Right Action’, 36). On this reading, the person who has properly cultivated their spiritual excellences will know which character traits result in right action “given certain specifiable circumstances” (I&I 10). As such doing the right thing, for Stebbing, is not as simple as following a maxim like ‘pursue happiness’. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. In the work of modern virtue ethicists like Hursthouse, there is some controversy over this arguably narrow conception of happiness as achievable through a singular way of life. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See, e.g., Kraut, *Aristotle.* [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. From 1941–1942, Stebbing was the first woman president of what was then known as the Ethical Union (now Humanists UK), a charitable organization promoting secular ethical values. Laird describes Stebbing as a “candid secularist” (Laird, ‘Reflections’, 21). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Henry Sidgwick emphasizes the importance of human excellences in ethics in his *The Method of Ethics* (1874) but doesn’t discuss *spiritual* excellences. It may be that Stebbing is drawing on discussions (outside philosophy) of human spirit during the War. It’s worth noting that Dorothy Emmet, a contemporary of Stebbing’s, also draws up a list of ‘spiritual excellences’ very similar to Stebbing’s, in a paper published in 1946 (just a year after *Men and Moral Principles).* See Emmet, ‘Importance’. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. This allusion to Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (8.197)is not coincidental. Like Hobbes (and Aristotle), Stebbing’s view is that social goods, grounded in our interactions and relations to other members of a society, are necessary for the kind of happiness that makes a certain kind of way of life worthwhile. For both Hobbes and Stebbing (and Aristotle), a life lived in a state of nature, without some kind of societal structure, would be nasty and brutish. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Many Neo-Aristotelians are also virtue ethicists insofar as virtue ethics involves the satisfaction of a moral standard implicit in a Neo-Aristotelian Naturalist meta-ethical view, and hence it is at points difficult (and unnecessary) to keep the two separate. For example, Julia Peters points out that insofar as virtue ethicists want to argue that virtue is tied to human flourishing, they “tend to be sympathetic to ethical naturalism” and “consider it to be one of the strengths of their theories that they seek to ground morality in human nature by associating moral excellence with human flourishing” (Peters, *Aristotelian Ethics*, 1). It’s worth noting that Stebbing does not explicitly separate her first level (virtue ethicist) views from her second level (Aristotelian naturalist) views. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Frey, ‘Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism’, 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. This is an idea we find in Peter Geach (Geach, ‘Good and Evil’ ) and inherited by many Neo-Aristotelians, according to which goodness to be situated “in relation to the nature of the organism that the goodness is being attributed to” (Hacker-Wright et al., ‘Introduction’, 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Compare these remarks with (e.g.) Philippa Foot’s claim that “human beings need the mental capacity for learning language; they also need powers of imagination that allow them to understand stories, to join in songs and dances–and to laugh at jokes. Without such things human beings may survive and reproduce themselves, but they are deprived” (Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 43). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Both *MMP* and Macdonald’s review of the text were published after Stebbing’s death. As Macdonald puts it, “Unhappily, we shall never know how she would have resolved this puzzle.” (Macdonald, ‘Men and Moral Principles’, 78). We can, however, speculate based on what Stebbing did put down on paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Macdonald’s objection, especially her concern that humans “may develop bad characteristics as easily as good”, is a version of what is known as the ‘wrong properties objection’ to contemporary perfectionism. Perfectionism is a theory of well-being (with Aristotelian roots) on which “what makes for a good life is constituted by the exercise of certain features that are central to our nature as the kind of creatures that we are” (Bradford, ‘Perfectionism’). The ‘wrong properties objection’ is the objection that some (arguably many) characteristics that are natural to human beings are intuitively *not* good (Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 9; Bradford, ‘Problems’, 351–353). For instance, consider Mary Midgley’s suggestion that an extra-terrestrial observing human activity over history, who has studied every war, massacre, and genocide ever committed, might conclude that it is natural for humans to slaughter one another (Midgley, ‘Concept of Beastliness’, 131). Yet, if a theory of well-being committed us to thinking that slaughtering one another was good, the objection goes, we would surely want to revise that theory of well-being. Macdonald’s objection follows a similar line of thought: if humans develop bad characteristics as easily as good, what is it that differentiates between them? What metric do we employ or draw on to separate good from bad? [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Chapman, *Susan Stebbing*, 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See Kraut, ‘Aristotle’s Ethics’, 5.2, for a potential answer to this question, in regard to Aristotle’s own ethics.) [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. We would like to thank Benjamin Lipscomb, Gwen Bradford, David O’Connor, and anonymous referees for this journal for invaluable feedback and discussion on this paper. A version of this paper was presented as a work in progress at various venues. We’d like to thank the philosophers present for feedback Birkbeck, University of London and the Human Abilities Centre in Berlin, especially the Centre’s Directors Dominik Perler and Barbara Vetter. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)