

Susan Stebbing: Analysis, Common Sense, and Public Philosophy

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CHAPTER

Stebbing's Pelicans: Public Philosophy in *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose*

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Abstract

This chapter argues that two of Susan Stebbing's most notable works of public philosophy—*Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) and *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939)—can be understood as one unified project. That is, despite their differences, both texts are attempts to enhance democratic citizens' ability to think clearly. West also contrasts Stebbing's approach to public philosophy with that of Bertrand Russell's, highlighting her practical and actionable approach, which aims to provide readers with tools for critical thinking. Compared to Russell's more idealized and didactic "transfer of knowledge" approach, Stebbing's "skills and training" approach to public philosophy focuses on how we can think better and "to some purpose."

Keywords: Susan Stebbing, Bertrand Russell, public philosophy, democratic ideals, practical philosophy, critical thinking

Subject: Philosophy, Metaphysics, 20th-Century Philosophy

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Introduction

By the end of the 1930s, Susan Stebbing had served as president of both the Mind Association (1931–32) and the Aristotelian Society (1933–34), co-founded the journal *Analysis* (1933), and, between 1924 and 1939, published at least one article every year in a range of leading philosophy journals (Janssen-Lauret 2021, 4). She was also the first woman in Britain to be promoted to a full professorship in philosophy, at Bedford College (later integrated into Royal Holloway), in 1933. In the last few years of the 30s, however, Stebbing began to move away from writing for an academic audience and instead wrote two books that were designed to be read by non-specialists: *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937) and *Thinking to Some Purpose* (*TSP*, 1939).[1] Both texts were published as part of the Pelican series; an imprint of Penguin publishing.[2] Allen Lane, the creator of the Pelican series, described it as "another form of education for people like me who'd left school at 16" (McCrum 2013). Pelican books were written for a rising number of autodidacts in Britain: self-educated individuals who were unable to attend university but nonetheless found themselves with a hunger for knowledge. In that sense, as an article celebrating the return of the Pelican series in 2014 put it, they were "a university without walls" (Sutherland 2014). Both of Stebbing's texts were widely read and did for philosophy what other titles in the Pelican series had done for history, literature, and the sciences.

p. 152 In this essay, I compare *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose* in order to discern what they can tell us about Stebbing's approach to writing philosophy for a popular audience. The question of how philosophers can, and why they should, engage in public philosophy is very much a live question today and, I will argue, an analysis of Stebbing's approach can inform that debate.[3] On the surface, *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose* are very different texts, which presents a prima facie challenge to thinking of them both as part of the same project. The former is a critique of the popular scientific writings of James Jeans and Arthur Eddington; two of the foremost popularizers of science in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. The subject matter, predominantly, is the latest developments in physics (such as Einstein's theories of relativity and quantum mechanics), the question of how best to communicate these developments to a non-specialist audience, and what (if any) philosophical conclusions can be drawn from them. *Thinking to Some Purpose,* meanwhile, is described on the cover of the original 1939 Pelican edition as "a manual to clear thinking, showing how to detect illogicalities in other peoples' mental processes and how to avoid them in our own." Stebbing begins *Thinking to Some Purpose* with an analysis of political speeches (especially those of the former Conservative prime minister, Stanley Baldwin) and includes further analysis of speeches, newspaper articles, and advertisements. Stebbing's aim here is to show how we can detect fallacies in language used in the world around us every day—and the importance of doing so. While there are seemingly different issues at stake in each text, I will show that they are part of a unified project: that of ensuring that the citizens of a democracy are in a position to *think clearly.* Stebbing's over-arching aim, in other words, is to ensure that each individual knows *how* to think clearly and is not restricted from doing so by bad mental habits or misuses of language.

I begin, in section one, with an outline of both texts, focusing on the audience, the targets, and the aims of each. In section two, I compare the two texts, identifying key similarities and differences—focusing also on Stebbing's motivations for writing on these two subject matters. I explain what unifies the two texts and give an account of Stebbing's over- arching project. Finally, I reconstruct Stebbing's model of public philosophy and
p. 153 compare it with the account of public philosophy endorsed by Betrand Russell. I also examine ↳ how Stebbing's approach might fit into the contemporary landscape of public philosophy. I argue that Stebbing has an egalitarian, democratic account of human reason and believes that the role of public philosophy is to provide each individual with the freedom to think clearly.

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1 The Audience, Targets, and Aims of Stebbing's Pelicans

1.1 Philosophy and the Physicists

In *Philosophy and the Physicists,* published in 1937, Stebbing explains that she is writing for "[O]ther philosophers *and* for that section of the reading public who buy in large quantities and, no doubt, devour with great earnestness the popular books written by scientists for their enlightenment" (*PP*, ix, my emphasis)

Stebbing thus has two groups of people in mind as her audience: academic philosophers and the kinds of readers who wish to be "enlightened" about what is going on in the sciences (such autodidactic readers were the target audience of the Pelican series more generally (Sutherland 2014)). What both groups have in common, Stebbing explains, is their dependence on popular scientists to keep them up to date on the latest scientific developments. Only scientists themselves can put in the time, effort, and training required to understand the latest developments in science in depth. Most of us are not scientists and so are unable to do so. Thus, if the role of the sciences is to determine the nature of the world we inhabit, *popular* scientists play a crucial role in keeping the rest of us in the loop about what that world is like.

Stebbing acknowledges that philosophers and "the reading public" will engage with popular scientific writings for different reasons. The latter do so, perhaps, simply out of curiosity or a desire to be "enlightened." The former—philosophers (and metaphysicians, in particular)—do so, Stebbing argues, because

> [w]e are dependent upon the scientists for an exposition of those developments which—so we find them proclaiming—have important and far-reaching consequences for philosophy. (*PP*, ix)

Working on the assumption that our *metaphysical* attempts to describe reality ought to be informed by (if not always totally consistent with) the latest ↳ *scientific* descriptions of reality, it seems that philosophers are dependent on scientists to keep their work up to date. Like the general readers of popular scientific texts, philosophers do not (usually) have the time and leisure to also be experts within a particular field of science. So, if their work is to be informed by science, it will need to rely on that science being "translated" into a form that is accessible to the non-specialist. It is also worth noting, however, that Stebbing suggests there is a tendency for *scientists themselves* to proclaim that their work has important philosophical consequences. Stebbing maintains that an additional role of the philosopher is to confirm (or deny) such claims and thus keep such scientists in check.

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The targets of Stebbing's critique in *Philosophy and the Physicists* are Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington —two physicists who, while highly accomplished in their field, do *not* leave it to professionally trained philosophers to identify the philosophical implications of modern physics. Stebbing argues that Jeans and Eddington, as the two most widely read popular scientific writers in Britain at the time, have a particular responsibility to ensure they communicate the right kind of information to their readers in the right kind of way. Yet, she argues, "our popular expositors do not always serve us very well" *(PP*, ix). Both writers are guilty of two sins: gratuitous and misleading use of metaphors and anthropomorphism in their writing about nature, and jumping too quickly from theoretical developments in physics to metaphysical conclusions (*PP*, 5). On the first count, Stebbing criticises the fact that Jeans and Eddington try to "convey exact thought in inexact language" (*PP*, 7). As Stebbing puts it, "*exact* thought cannot be *conveyed in inexact language*; at best it can be but partially conveyed, at worst the illusion will be created that it has been conveyed" (*PP*, 7). In other words, these writers are in danger of giving their readers the impression that they have comprehended the whole picture—that they have properly understood this or that particular issue—when in fact they have been given only part of that picture, or worse, the wrong picture entirely. On the second count, of moving from developments in physics to philosophical conclusions, Stebbing has in mind the fact that both Jeans and

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Eddington argue for idealism (the view that mind is more fundamental than matter) on the basis that, roughly speaking, modern physics tells us that the world is more observer-dependent than was previously appreciated.

When it comes to misleading uses of language, Stebbing points out that Eddington often portrays science as if
p. 155 it were a person; specifically, a woman. By writing in this way, Eddington implies that the role of scientists is to
↳ communicate with this woman, Science, and that, when pursued in the right way, the job of scientists is to get Science to tell us what the world is really like. In using such language, Stebbing claims, Eddington is guilty of committing "the anthropomorphic fallacy" (*PP*, 15). While Eddington "seem[s] to believe in a strange anthropomorphic female" (*PP*, 15), Stebbing herself emphasis that "Science is not a Goddess or a woman. We cannot ask *science,* but only *scientists*" (*PP*, 9). Stebbing's point is that neither science nor nature is a person whom we can communicate with; it is incapable of telling us about itself. When we are presented with a scientific account of things we are not, strictly speaking, coming face-to-face with a set of *facts*. What we are presented with is a *theory*; a set of conclusions arrived at by *scientists*, based on the evidence available.

However, Stebbing's concern is not just that misleading metaphors can lead to misunderstandings about the nature of science but also that they can be used to manipulate readers. Stebbing identifies herself as "common reader" (*PP*, 5) (at least when it comes to physics), rather than an expert, and worries that she and other common readers are in danger of not only being let down by popularizes of science but deliberately misled. For instance, Stebbing claims that (in the work of Jeans and Eddington) "[m]any devices are apparently used for no other purpose than to reduce the reader to a state of abject terror" (*PP*, 10). Having put their readers in this fearful state, such popularizers then exploit their position of authority to promote mystical or religious claims that often do not actually follow from the science they are expositing. Stebbing argues that this is part of a larger trend and that, by using this kind of language,

> [T]hey [Jeans and Eddington] seek to arouse his [i.e., the reader's] emotions, thereby inducing a frame of mind inimical to intellectual discernment. Popularizations of such a kind constitute a grave danger to clear thinking. (*PP*, 5)

Stebbing's point is that writers like Eddington and Jeans are well aware of their status as scientific experts but,
p. 156 unfortunately, use that status to promote their own agenda.[4] Eddington, for instance, having explained to the
↳ reader that physics tells us the world is merely a set of symbols, then argues that it is not science but mysticism—and, in turn, religion—that can provide us with answers to questions like "what is real?" Eddington argues that, unlike the entities described by physics, it is possible to have "intimate knowledge" of God through mystical (i.e., not scientifically measurable), religious experiences (*NPW*, 322). For Stebbing, this goes beyond what Eddington's position as a *scientist*— and a popularizer of science—entitles him to do.

To sum up, then, Stebbing's aim in *Philosophy and the Physicists* is to identify (and, in turn, do what she can to remove) the barriers to clear thinking that popular scientific writing, such as that of Jeans and Eddington, present. Part of what it means to think *clearly,* for Stebbing, is to think *freely*.[5] When language is used, from those with a position of power or expertise, that is intended to raise certain emotions—emotions such as fear which can then be manipulated—an audience (in this case, readers of popular science) is *not* thinking freely. Their thought is, quite deliberately as Stebbing sees it, being *coerced* or *led* in a particular direction: toward the desired conclusions of the writer (such as Eddington's view that we must ultimately turn to mysticism or religion to determine "what is real"). We will find that these are the same concerns that Stebbing more explicitly raises, albeit in a wider context than just popular science writing, in *Thinking to Some Purpose.*

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1.2 Thinking to Some Purpose

Stebbing sets up *Thinking to Some Purpose* as a very different kind of text than *Philosophy and the Physicists*. The preface makes it clear that the stakes are high, and it is with a strong sense of impending threat that Stebbing lays out her aims:

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> I am convinced of the urgent need for a democratic people to think clearly without the distortions due to unconscious bias and unrecognized ignorance. Our failures in thinking are in part due to faults which we could to some extent overcome were we to see clearly how these faults arise. It is the aim of this book to make a small effort in this direction. (*TSP*, 5)

The audience of *Thinking to Some Purpose* is thus "democratic people"—that is, anyone who wishes to continue living in a democratic society and enjoying the freedoms that entails. The text was published a year before the outbreak of the Second World War and political developments in Germany and Russia are referenced throughout. Stebbing believed that instructing the public on how to "think clearly" can play a role in fending off the twin threats of fascism and communism.

Stebbing maintains that the defense of democracy must start at home. Unlike those in *Philosophy and the Physicists*, Stebbing's criticisms in *Thinking to Some Purpose* are not directed at specific figures or texts but at tropes in British political and public discourse—such as political speeches, journalism, and advertisements. In other words, Stebbing criticizes ways of communicating that are common (whether deliberately or not) in the British public sphere. This is not to say that Stebbing does not pick out *any* particular figures for criticism. For example, the "prologue" of the text focuses primarily on excerpts from speeches by Stanley Baldwin (Conservative prime minister in 1923–24, 1924–29, and 1935–37). Nonetheless, the scope of her criticism is broad and the lessons she offers are intended to be universal (and so applicable beyond Britain and, arguably, beyond the 1930s).

Over the course of fifteen chapters (including a prologue and an epilogue), Stebbing identifies a series of bad habits that can be routinely found in public and political discourse. These include habits such as using "emotive" language in place of purely descriptive language (*TSP*, 45–52), which can lead audiences to believe they are being *informed* when in fact they are being *manipulated*, or "potted thinking" (*TSP*, 53–61), where ideas are condensed into an oversimplified form (such as a political slogan) as a substitute for genuine reflection or critical engagement.

Part of Stebbing's aim is to help us to avoid developing these habits ourselves. For example, in line with David
p. 158 Hume's claim that a "wise man proportions his belief to the evidence,"[6] Stebbing argues that "[t]he strength ↳ with which we hold a belief ought to bear some proportion to the amount of evidence upon which it is based" (*TSP*, 27). Inevitably, however, this is very often *not* the case; we often hold on to beliefs, due to how we *feel* about things, "unquestioningly" (*TSP*, 32). Consequently, Stebbing encourages us to question our most cherished beliefs. In her own words:

> It is a good habit to ask, with regard to our cherished beliefs, 'Now, how did I come to think that?' An honest answer would sometimes be both surprising and enlightening; it could not fail to be useful. (*TSP*, 32)

In other words, we can do our best to make sure that we do not fall into the habit of holding unjustified beliefs by developing the healthier habit of challenging them. It is worth noting, however, that, for Stebbing, there is value in simply becoming *aware* of our bad mental habits, even if we are not able to totally overcome them. There is utility, she claims, in simply answering the question "how did I come to think that?" regardless of whether we are able to *stop* ourselves from doing so.

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As in *Philosophy and the Physicists,* Stebbing's approach is to focus on specific excerpts of writing to make wider claims about the use of language, and the extent to which it can be a barrier to clear thinking when misused. For instance, as an example of potted thinking, Stebbing cites a letter to the editor from an issue of *The New Statesman*:

> Twice, in your leading article in last Wednesday's paper, there occur the words 'British cowardice'. One wonders what is the nationality of the man who wrote it, as the combination of these two words, together, is unknown in the English language, or in the tongue of any country in the world. In the present delicate situation in Europe would not the words 'British Diplomacy' be more appropriate?
>
> I sign myself,
>
> 'A Britisher', and Proud of it. (*TSP*, 60)

The potted thought here is the idea that "British cowardice" is a contradiction in terms. The author of this letter holds the (most likely, unquestioned) belief that to be British is to be brave. Stebbing's point is that while there might once have been some truth behind the notion that British people are brave—perhaps there are examples of great bravery by British people (the exploits of the British army in the First World War is likely to have been
p. 159 in the ↳ public mindset in the 1930s)—this thought has subsequently been "potted." It has been condensed and oversimplified to the point that the author of the letter sees being British and being a coward as contradictory notions.

Again, Stebbing's aim is to identify misuses of language and their connections to bad mental habits and to instruct us on what we can do to rectify them. The heavy lifting, as it was in *Philosophy and the Physicists*, is concentrated on making us aware of such misuses of language, primarily by using examples. This suggests that, for Stebbing, simply being aware that these bad habits exist is at least half the job of fixing them. In the next section, I explain the similarities between *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose* in greater depth and make the case for thinking they are part of a unified project.

2 A Unified Project

In this section, I argue that while the aims of *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose* appear to diverge from one another, the two texts are part of the same project. Aside from the separate subject matters (discussed in the previous section), one important difference between the two texts is methodological. Stebbing's approach in *Thinking to Some Purpose* is, at least on the surface, "positive." That is, she attempts to contribute to public discourse by producing a "manual" in clear thinking. The text consists of a series of lessons in how we can think clearly and develop the right kinds of mental habits. In other words, Stebbing's aim here is to explain what we *should* be doing and to instruct us in how to do it. In contrast, Stebbing's approach in *Philosophy and the Physicists* is more "negative" in the sense that she is here largely concerned with criticizing the work of two specific thinkers (Jeans and Eddington). In other words, Stebbing's central aim in *Philosophy and the Physicists* is to tell us what is *wrong* with popular science writing.[7] This was emphasized by several early reviews of the text, including one by the Cambridge metaphysician C. D. Broad, who suggests that the main
p. 160 achievement in *Philosophy and the Physicists* is clearing up ↳ "the messes made by amateur philosophers" (Broad 1938, 226). As Siobhan Chapman notes in her intellectual biography of Stebbing, this was part of a larger trend and many early reviews were "almost entirely negative in tone" (2013, 116).

However, I hope to have shown in the previous section that, if we dig a little deeper, there are also some important similarities between Stebbing's approach in *Philosophy and the Physicists* and in *Thinking to Some Purpose*. While the latter certainly appears to be a more "positive" text, offering guidance on how we as individuals can learn to think clearly and, in turn, contribute to the preservation of our democratic freedoms,

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Stebbing often chooses to instruct her readers by picking out specific pieces of writing for criticism. That is, Stebbing often instructs the reader in what they should be doing by *showing* them what they ought *not* to do or what others are doing badly. For instance, she explains how coverage of the Spanish Civil War in the British Press (which, according to Stebbing, was largely sympathetic to the Spanish government) disguises *judgments* behind language that appears to express merely factual statements. For instance, she explains how descriptions of the Spanish government often include terms like "Loyal" and "Anti-Fascist" while descriptions of their opponents include terms like "Revolt," "Insurrection," "Fascist," and "Rebel" (*TSP*, 50). The problem here, Stebbing claims, is not the judgments themselves (it does not matter, at least when it comes to linguistic analysis, which side you are on) but the fact that are they hidden behind apparently descriptive language. This can lead the reader to believe they are being informed of the facts when, in actuality, they are being *convinced* to support one side of the conflict rather than the other. Again, the problem here is that "emotive" language (language with "tied suggestions" designed to make you *feel* a certain way) is being presented as though it were in fact purely descriptive (or "scientific") language (*TSP*, 45–46). As we have seen, this is the same concern that Stebbing has with Jeans and Eddington's writing in *Philosophy and the Physicists.* There, Stebbing objects to the use of emotional manipulation against an audience of "common readers" who want simply to be informed about the latest developments in physics but are instead (as Stebbing sees it) being scared into accepting conclusions about the nature of reality that go well beyond the scope of the physical sciences.[8]

p. 161 In both texts, then, Stebbing's approach involves close textual analysis of specific examples (from popular science writing in *Philosophy and the Physicists* or political speeches, newspapers, and advertisements in *Thinking to Some Purpose*) and an examination of what has gone wrong. The errors that Stebbing identifies are often improper or misleading uses of language (as in the example above). Thus, it is clear that Stebbing believes the way we use language is crucially important in public discourse; whether that be discussions of the latest developments in science or debates about politics. We might then ask *why* Stebbing believes that using language in the right kind of way is so important. The answer to this question can be found in *Thinking to Some Purpose*, where Stebbing explains that language is a *tool* that we use to communicate with one another: "to express our personal reactions to situations, to stimulate a response in someone else, and for the sake of thinking something out" (*TSP*, 45). When we *mis*use language, however, we are using that tool improperly and such language will fail to "achieve the purpose for which it is used" (*TSP*, 45). This can also have more severe knock-on effects. If I mislead you, Stebbing argues, or even worse "if I mislead myself . . . I shall be unable to think straight" (*TSP*, 47). Thus, bad language usage is one of the barriers to clear thinking that Stebbing believes presents a threat to democracy (*TSP*, 5).

There is evidence that the same concern motivates Stebbing's criticism of popular scientific writing in *Philosophy and the Physicists*. In the first chapter of that text, Stebbing outlines both the *importance* of works of popular science as well as the danger that such works pose to a "common reader" when they are not written in the right kind of way:

> There is among common readers a genuine interest in scientific research, a desire to follow as far as a layman can what is being found and to understand the implications of these findings. . . The writing of such an exposition is undoubtedly difficult. It requires not only great powers of exposition but also an apprehension of the sort of difficulties the layman is likely to find and the skill to surmount them. . . . [T]here are not a few scientists who have written books that satisfy our needs. Unfortunately, however, there are other famous scientists who do not seem to realize that their subject has an intrinsic interest for the common reader, and accordingly they seek to arouse his emotions, thereby inducing a frame of mind inimical to intellectual discernment. Popularizations of such a kind constitute a grave danger to thinking clearly. (*PP*, 5)

p. 162 This is one of the few times that Stebbing explicitly mentions "thinking clearly" in *Philosophy and the Physicists*. Nonetheless, she is making the same point as above. When the tool of language is misused—for instance, when

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it is used to arouse emotions in contexts where it ought to be used simply to inform—our ability to think clearly is hampered. This supports the claim that Stebbing is working on a unified project across both texts and that this project is an attempt to ensure that the public (or at least, those members of the public who engage in public discourse, whether it concerns science or politics) are free to think clearly.

Stebbing's over-arching concerns seems to be that in the course of their daily lives, ordinary people (non-specialists, or what Stebbing calls "ordinary readers" (*PP*, 5) are likely to come across language—whether written or spoken—that threatens their freedom to think clearly. This might simply be part of the course of one's daily routine—for example, when one is reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, or seeing an advertisement. Or it could be in a text that one has chosen to read (such as Jeans's or Eddington's books) for the sake of personal "enlightenment" (*PP*, ix). Across both *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose,* Stebbing's aim is to instruct her readers in how to detect this kind of language and how to avoid allowing it to restrict one's freedom to think clearly. While she does offer more general guidance, she evidently believed that the most effective way to guide her readers was to use specific examples. The examples used in *Thinking to Some Purpose* are considerably more wide-ranging than those used in *Philosophy and the Physicists*, but this is perhaps because there is a wider range of improper uses of language (and thus barriers to thinking clearly) in everyday life than in popular science writing.[9]

The aim of these two works of popular philosophy, then, is, at bottom, to prevent improper uses of language (from popular scientists, politicians, journalists, and advertisers) from restricting individual people's freedom to think clearly. I thus suggest that Stebbing saw the aim of *public* philosophy itself as *equipping* non-specialist readers with the ability to preserve their freedom to think clearly. In the next section, I say more about what
p. 163 Stebbing ↳ takes thinking clearly to involve and identify what these two texts tell us about Stebbing's approach to public philosophy.

3 Stebbing's Public Philosophy

3.1 Public Philosophy and Thinking Clearly

In this section, I outline Stebbing's approach to public philosophy as exemplified by *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose.* I argue that Stebbing adopts what we might call a "skills and training" approach to public philosophy which aims at helping her readers to identify and avoid barriers to clear thinking. I conclude by suggesting that, at a time when there is a lot of pressure for academic philosophers to disseminate philosophy to a broader audience, there is a gap in the market for something like Stebbing's approach to public philosophy.

Stebbing was not alone in promoting philosophy to a broader audience. Bertrand Russell was perhaps the most successful of Stebbing's contemporaries in breaking through to a popular audience, appearing frequently on television in Britain and, in 1950, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. In "Philosophy for Laymen," first published in 1946 in the pedagogical journal *University Quarterly* (now, *Higher Education Quarterly*), Russell offers a series of incentives for the "layman" (i.e., the non-specialist) to engage with philosophy.[10] Russell claims that philosophy has two broad aims (which are consistent with the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy). First, "it [is] aimed at a theoretical understanding of the structure of the world" and, second, it aims to "discover and inculcate the best possible way of life" (1950, 23). It's worth noting that many of Russell's claims echo the kind of advice that Stebbing offers in *Thinking to Some Purpose.* For example, he advocates avoiding "emotional bias" in political discourse, examining the sources of our opinions, and questioning even those beliefs "we find it most painful to doubt" (1950, 30). The latter claim, in particular, is very reminiscent of Stebbing's encouragement that we examine our most "cherished beliefs" (*TSP*, 32).

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p. 164 However, Russell does not limit the benefits of philosophical training to fixing bad habits. He maintains that the advantages of engaging with philosophy are lofty and that philosophy can improve our moral character. Furthermore, Russell argues that if everyone were equipped with philosophical training then, on a societal level, there would be considerably fewer disputes and, on a personal level, we would all lead more peaceful and fulfilling lives. As he puts it:

> [Philosophy] supplies an antidote to the anxieties and anguish of the present, and makes possible the nearest approach to serenity that is available to a sensitive mind in our tortured and uncertain world. (1950, 33)

Drawing on the ancient Aristotelian notion of leading a good life by accruing wisdom, Russell promotes philosophy as something of intrinsic personal value—an "intellectual virtue" (1950, 30).

In that sense, Russell's approach to public philosophy is more idealistic than Stebbing's. Unlike Russell, Stebbing presents the tools of philosophical thinking (e.g., detecting fallacies, avoiding inconsistences, proportioning our beliefs to the evidence) as *means to an end*. After all, for Stebbing, all thinking is *thinking to some purpose.* For instance, she argues that thinking clearly is something that will allow us to continue to hold those who speak in public contexts (like politicians) to account and, in turn, enable us to keep living in a genuinely democratic society. As Stebbing explains, politicians are only able to win us over by using emotive language because we allow them too: "We are sometimes too lazy, usually too busy, and often too ignorant to think out what is involved in the statements we so readily accept" (*TSP*, 53). But if we avoid reacting emotionally to politicians' claims and learn to examine them logically, then they will have to start proving things to us on the basis of evidence.

So what is the aim of public philosophy, for Stebbing, if it is not something of intrinsic value? If it is not something that will contribute to an individual's moral or intellectual improvement (as it is for Russell), why should we engage with it? Given the conclusions arrived at in the previous section—and working on the assumption that *Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose* exemplify Stebbing's views on the aims (and proper methodology) of public philosophy—we can reasonably infer that Stebbing believes that the aim of public philosophy is to ensure that each individual is able to think clearly. That is, for Stebbing, the tools
p. 165 of philosophy should ↳ be used to ensure both that members of the public know *what it is* to think clearly and that they are actually able to do so. But thinking clearly is not of *intrinsic* value either; it is not something for which to strive for its own sake. Thinking clearly, for Stebbing, is essential to freedom and to the flourishing of a democratic society.

In this sense, Stebbing's Pelicans are *situated texts.* It is no coincidence that they were published toward the end of the 1930s; Stebbing felt compelled to turn toward a much wider audience than academic philosophers precisely because of the events taking place in the world around her (most notably, the rise of fascism in Germany). I thus think Beaney and Chapman (2021) are right to say that Stebbing's turn toward public philosophy was driven by "her belief that the structures and principles of formal logic need not be seen as a closed, isolated system but rather could profitably be applied to the problems and issues of modern life." Of course, it is much easier to situate *Thinking to Some Purpose* amid the political goings-on of the 1930s but, as I hope to have shown, this is also true of *Philosophy and the Physicists.* People are not free if they not thinking clearly—if, for example, they are being coerced when they believe they are being informed—and freedom, if anything, is to be sought for its own sake.

3.2 A "Skills and Training" Approach to Public Philosophy

I want to conclude this section with some remarks on how Stebbing's approach to public philosophy might fit into the landscape of contemporary public philosophy.

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The ability to engage with a public, non-specialist audience has long been a feature of philosophy, as exemplified by the appearance of figures like Russell on the BBC or the celebrity status of another Nobel Prize winner, Henri Bergson, in France in the 1910s (see Herring 2019). As one scholar has argued, given the fact that Socrates engaged in philosophical debates with the "person-in-the-street" in the agora of ancient Athens, some of the best-known and earliest Western philosophy was public philosophy (Weinstein 2014, 35– 36).[11] In the United Kingdom, in particular, the ability to disseminate research (albeit, not just philosophical research) to
p. 166 a wide audience ↳ is incentivised by what the Research Excellence Framework (the metric by which the research outputs of UK higher education institutions are evaluated) calls "impact"—defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."[12] Academic philosophers in Britain thus have a specific motivation to reach out beyond their peers to a popular audience.

Unsurprisingly, then, there are many channels by means of which philosophy is disseminated to non-specialists (both in the UK and elsewhere); whether that be through books, YouTube videos, or podcasts, for example. This has led to some recent debates about who philosophy is for and who is qualified, broadly speaking, to *do philosophy.* Jack Russell Weinstein, for example, raises the question of what constitutes philosophical expertise, citing Brian Leiter's claim that (as he puts it) "It would be odd if any non-philosopher ever came up with an "interesting philosophical insight" (2014, 34).[13] More recently, Timothy Williamson, in a guest post for the widely read philosophy blog *Daily Nous,* argues that while the democratization of knowledge should be encouraged, academic philosophers should nonetheless be seen as "experts" in philosophy to whom deference should be given, when appropriate. For Williamson, philosophy is not something we can all do equally well. Like any other science, it is something one must be trained to do, since it involves adopting highly sophisticated research methods and familiarizing oneself with a considerable amount of both historical and contemporary literature (for further discussion, with relation to Stebbing's popular philosophy, see West 2021a). Given the distinction between philosophical "experts" and "laypeople" (a distinction Russell was clearly also committed to), Weinstein also raises the question of what good (if any) public philosophy actually achieves. For example, he asks, does public philosophy improve the political life—that is, the quality of political debates, for example—of those with access to it (Weinstein 2014, 40)? Weinstein's answer is pessimistic. He concludes that, at best, philosophy serves as a form of entertainment what he calls a "pleasant distraction" (2014, 47). His explanation for this is that most public philosophy outlets, such as public talks or podcast episodes, are isolated incidents within a person's ordinary life. They might ↳ succeed in encouraging someone to reflect on their
p. 167 assumptions about a specific issue within a limited time frame, but they rarely impact on someone's day-to-day thinking.

However, I think this pessimistic approach to the contribution public philosophy can make to public, and especially political, discourse, is perhaps grounded on a particular understanding of how public philosophy *works.* Many public philosophy outlets—books, YouTube videos, podcasts—adopt what we might call a "transfer of knowledge" approach. On this model, the role of the "expert" is to simplify or condense the theories, arguments, and views of philosophers (both contemporary and historical) and present them to a non-specialist audience in a comprehensible manner. The successful *Philosophy Bites* podcast is a case in point. Williamson, for example, argues that popular philosophy should operate in much the same way as popular science. It should involve a specialist in the field communicating their findings to non-specialists in an engaging and informative manner. The upshot, as Stebbing puts it in her own discussion of popular *science*, is some kind of intellectual "enlightenment" (*PP*, ix).

This "transfer of knowledge" approach, however, is not the one that Stebbing adopts, which suggests that it ought not (at least, without further justification) be subject to the same kind of pessimism. Stebbing's approach, which draws on what was, at the time, a burgeoning field of critical thinking,[14] focuses on the *way* we think rather than *what* certain philosophers think or have thought. Her primary aim is to improve public, and especially political, discourse, meaning that what Weinstein calls "political improvement" is not

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something she hopes to achieve in a roundabout way—it is not a by-product of learning about various philosophers' views. Rather, it is the explicit and central aim of Stebbing's public writings. Stebbing's approach, which can appropriately be described as a "skills and training" approach to public philosophy, does *not* involve
p. 168 educating the public on any specific philosophical theories, arguments, or ideas.[15] In fact, virtually no philosophers (or their ↳ ideas) are mentioned in either *Philosophy and the Physicists* or *Thinking to Some Purpose.*[16]

Does that mean that Stebbing's "skills and training" model is preferable? On the one hand, one might argue that the continued relevance of a text like *Thinking to Some Purpose* today actually attests to the *failure* of Stebbing's method. As Michael Beaney notes, in a recent public philosophy podcast, when reading *Thinking to Some Purpose,* one cannot help but ask: has anything really changed (Forum for Philosophy, 2021)? Public discourse, especially in the age of the internet, is just as likely to provide examples of improper language usage, bad mental habits, and barriers to free thinking today as it was in the 1930s. If Stebbing's work *had* successfully improved public discourse, one might argue, surely we would be able to observe some kind of change. Of course, this kind of criticism would need empirical support—concerning Stebbing's readership for a start. My own view, however, is that Stebbing's "skills and training" approach to public philosophy has the potential to get around some of the concerns raised by commentators like Weinstein. In its favor, and in contrast to "transfer of knowledge" models, Stebbing's approach emphasizes that public philosophy—like any educational endeavor—should be a two-way street. Stebbing writes:

> An educator has two main objects: to impart knowledge and to create those mental habits that will enable his students, or pupils, to seek knowledge and to acquire the ability to form their own independent judgement based upon rational grounds. (*TSP*, 74)

For Stebbing, education is not just an act of "imparting knowledge"; it also involves the process of *training* students (i.e., broadly construed as anyone being educated) to develop the right kind of mental habits. Public philosophy should not, then, resemble a traditional university lecture-style setting, where an "expert" or "master" bestows the fruits of their scholarly labor on a passive audience. Instead, it requires its audience (i.e., the public) to actively engage rather than passively receive information. The consequence, if it is successful, is an audience that is equipped with learning tools (ways of thinking) that are applicable beyond any specific domain of philosophy.

p. 169 Ultimately, the case I am making in this chapter does not hinge upon the success or failure of Stebbing's "skills and training" approach to public philosophy (although, as I have suggested, I think it does offer some potential advantage compared to a typical "transfer of knowledge approach"). What I have set out to establish, instead, is that Stebbing does actually have a coherent, unified approach to engaging in public philosophy. Public philosophy, for Stebbing, aims at ensuring that the public are both motivated and equipped to think clearly. This is of vital importance, she believes, if we are to continue to live in a democratic society—that is, a society where free, public debate is something of value.

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Conclusion

I have argued that an analysis of the aims and methods of Stebbing's Pelicans (*Philosophy and the Physicists* and *Thinking to Some Purpose*) reveals that she has a unified approach to writing philosophy aimed at a public audience. Taking her leave from other early texts in the field of critical thinking, Stebbing places the emphasis on what philosophy can do for our *ways* of thinking rather than what exactly it is that we believe. The aim of both texts, I have argued, is to ensure that misuses of language—whether they be from popular scientists, politicians, journalists, or advertisers—do not cloud our thinking. But public philosophers cannot do this alone. We (that is, the "common reader"), too, must ensure that we are able to think clearly, Stebbing argues, by developing healthy mental habits, such as challenging our most cherished beliefs, and rooting out bad mental habits, like holding on to "potted thoughts." Philosophy, for Stebbing, is not an end in itself. Nor is thinking clearly. All thinking is *thinking to some purpose*. At the end of the day, Stebbing believes that that purpose is to preserve our individual liberty. Thinking freely requires thinking clearly—and *thinking* freely is crucial to *living* in a free, democratic society.

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Notes

Footnotes

1 1941 also saw the publication of *Ideals and Illusions,* another text aimed at a public audience.

2 *Philosophy and the Physicists* was first published by Methuen & Co. Limited in 1937. A later Pelican edition was published in 1944.

3 See, for example, volume 15, issue 1, of *Essays in Philosoph*y, which features a series of articles on public philosophy and its aims and purposes. See, in particular, Weinstein 2014, Pigliucci and Finkelman 2014; Chick and LaVine 2014.

4 Indeed, Stebbing is keen to emphasize the prominent role scientists hold in society—which they are able to exploit. She explains that, uniquely to the twentieth century, “theologians hang on to the mantles . . . of the popularizing scientist” and that some people now regard scientists as “the custodians of the spiritual element in the universe” (*PP*, 143–144).

5 The frontispiece to *Thinking to Some Purpose* is a quote from the notorious eighteenth-century deist and free-thinker Anthony Collins. The quotation, from Collins’s *Discourse on Free-thinking*, is his definition of free-thinking as “[Using] our Understandings, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or weakness of the evidence, because there is no other way to discover the truth.” By giving this reference pride of place at the beginning of the text and suggesting that her readers (the general public) need to learn to think clearly (and helping to provide the means), Stebbing is adding herself to a long line of free-thinking philosophers. Stebbing’s commitment to free-thinking also manifested itself in a more formal manner. There is a strong historical and organizational connection between the free-thinking of the Enlightenment era (which continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and humanism; an ethical movement that emphasizes independent thinking and a secular approach to various aspects of public life, such as education. Stebbing was president of Humanists UK (then known as the Ethical Union) for 1941–42.

6 David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.* (1777), 11.4, 110.

7 Elsewhere, I have argued that *Philosophy and the Physicists* offers more than just a critique of Jeans and Eddington. In West (2021b), I argue that Stebbing offers important insights into her philosophy of time and in West (2022) I argue that Stebbing develops an account of scientific progress that, to some extent, pre-empts Thomas Kuhn’s attempt to revise the “image of science” in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1).

8 One such conclusion is Eddington’s claim that “[t]he idea of a universal Mind or Logos would be, I think, a fairly plausible inference from the present state of scientific theory” (*NPW*, 338).

9 Additionally, Stebbing seems to think *philosophers* are likely to be misled by the likes of Jeans and Eddington (*PP*, ix). She does not seem to think philosophers are as likely to be misled by improper language in newspapers, political speeches, and advertisements. This is perhaps because of the esteem in which scientists are held (*PP*, 143–144) as opposed to the

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general skepticism directed toward politicians, journalists, and advertisers—and the fact that scientists are experts, while politicians, journalists, and advertisers need not be.

10 References here are to a republication of the essay in Russell's *Unpopular Essays*, published in 1950.

11 As Weinstein puts it, Aristotle's interlocutors were "slave boys and seers, strangers and playwrights, bullies and drunks, and prominent citizens" (2014, 36).

12 https://re.ukri.org/research/ref-impact/.

13 Leiter's remark is from the podcast *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life*, episode 20, (September 20, 2002).

14 For example, Stebbing identifies Robert H. Thouless's *Straight and Crooked Thinking,* published in 1930, as an important influence on her views.

15 This is not to say that Stebbing's own views are not influenced by specific philosophical ideologies. She is, as figures like J. L. Austin would later be, committed to an analysis of ordinary language. Further, as both Janssen-Lauret (2021) and West (2021b) argue, *Philosophy and the Physicists* can be seen as part of Stebbing's defense of a philosophical position she calls "realism." I have also argued, in West 2022, that *Philosophy and the Physicists,* upon closer inspection, reveals Stebbing's views on the philosophy of science.

16 Stebbing does discuss Russell in both texts, but in each case it is to criticize him (see, e.g., *PP*, 275, or *TSP*, 117–118).

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