

Susan Stebbing’s Intellectualism*

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs Susan Stebbing’s account of *intelligent dealing with a problem* and defends this account against charges that it relies on a “censurable kind” of intellectualism. This charge was made in Stebbing’s own time by Laird and Wittgenstein. Michael Kremer has recently made the case that Stebbing is also a proximate target of Gilbert Ryle’s attack on intellectualism. This paper argues that Stebbing should indeed be counted as an intellectualist since she holds that intelligent dealing with a problem requires propositional thought. Yet, for Stebbing, thinking is an activity of a whole person and is enabled and constrained by their dispositions. This complex picture of a thinker enables Stebbing’s account to resist arguments targeting certain forms of intellectualism such as Ryle’s regress argument. It also helps her to respond to the charge that she overemphasizes the importance of intellectual failures. On the picture that emerges, Stebbing offers a strikingly modern epistemology that incorporates the social features of a person as well as their purely intellectual features.

It is odd that anyone should be anxious to insist upon the danger of thinking about our actions. (Stebbing 1941/1948, 50)

According to Susan Stebbing, thinking aims to solve some practical or theoretical problem. One thinks to some purpose. Thinking is clear or intelligent when it draws connections between thoughts that are relevant to the problem. Stebbing argues that people often fail to think clearly even in matters of great importance; thinkers draw connections that are not relevant to solving their problem or resist drawing relevant but uncomfortable connections.¹ Specifically, thinkers connect or fail to connect pieces of information, or *propositions*. Stebbing believes that the “sorry” state of the world in the late 1930s resulted partly from these failures of clear thinking. She aims to identify for a popular audience how these failures in thinking arise and thereby to help to overcome them. Stebbing is therefore a kind of *intellectualist* in at least two senses. Firstly, intelligent dealing with a problem requires reflective, propositional thinking. Secondly, many important problems arise partially from failures of intelligent thinking.

‘Intellectualism’ also functions as a kind of pejorative. An intellectualist ascribes too much power to explicit rational thought at the expense of other aspects of the person. This charge has been leveled against Stebbing. Shortly after her death, J. Laird (1948, 22-3) charged that she was an intellectualist of a “censurable kind” for believing that “moral vision was of greater moment than the steadfastness with which the vision was pursued”.² Laird complained that the “moral deterioration” in the first half of the 20th century is not due to a lack of clear thinking but to a lack of “fidelity” to accepted moral standards. Similarly, in conversations reported by Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein (2015, §21.20) appears to have criticized Stebbing for

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¹Stebbing develops her view in *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930/1948), *Logic in Practice* (1934), *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939/1941), and *Ideals and Illusions* (1941/1948).

²This passage is also mentioned by (Kremer 2017b, 35 footnote 35), who points to some language reminiscent of Ryle.

the “primitive” misconception that people “would turn away from Fascism when the fallacies were clear to them.”

At around the same time, Gilbert Ryle also argued against adherents of a view that he dubbed ‘intellectualism’. Ryle’s intellectualist holds that “intelligent acts must be backed by intelligent internal acts of considering regulative propositions” (Kremer 2017b, 17). Ryle argued that intellectualism leads to a vicious regress because the internal acts of considering regulative propositions must “in turn must be backed by further intelligent internal acts of considering meta-regulative propositions, and so on, *ad infinitum*.” Finite beings like us cannot engage in infinitely many distinct cognitive acts before any action. Therefore, Ryle’s intellectualist cannot account for action. Yet, Ryle does not specify any major philosopher who is an intellectualist in this sense, and it is hard to find any explicit targets. Michael Kremer (2017b, 31) argues that Stebbing is one of the unnamed “proximate targets” of Ryle’s criticism. On this view, Stebbing’s account of rational deliberation is incoherent. Kremer argues that Stebbing must make concessions to Ryle’s view by allowing dispositions, habits, or capacities to play a role in intelligence. But these concessions undermine her goals of improving public debate and public action through her her writings. The problem is that people don’t “know how to behave” rather than that they are ignorant of certain facts.

The primary goal of this paper is to explain Stebbing’s account of rational deliberation in light of these charges. Fully articulating Stebbing’s view will reveal that Kremer’s charge is misplaced. Although Stebbing agrees that intelligent dealing with a problem requires explicit propositional thinking, she would not agree that every intelligent act of propositional thinking must be backed by its own intelligent internal act of propositional thinking. Rather, Stebbing explicitly sees a role for habits, dispositions, and capacities in rational thinking. The secondary goal of this paper is to explain the positive role that Stebbing finds for habits and dispositions in rational deliberation and how these inform her intellectualism. According to Stebbing, the complexity of the practical and theoretical problems faced by ordinary people (workers, citizen voters, fire marshals, and so on) requires intellectual exercises such as explicitly formulating principles so that they are subject to potential refutation. The third goal is to explain how Stebbing would respond to arguments purporting to show that she misdiagnoses and over-intellectualizes the problems of her era.

Stebbing’s proposed obstacles to clear thinking and her solutions are strikingly modern in flavor. Stebbing proposes that thinking is done by the whole person and not an isolated intellectual part of a person. As a result, all aspects of one’s person can influence how one thinks. Of particular note, Stebbing emphasizes how one’s social position and nationality can introduce obstacles to clear thinking.

1 Intellectualism

Contemporary debates about intellectualism begin with the observation that agents and their actions may be characterized by “intelligence epithets” such as “‘intelligent,’ ‘clever,’ ‘sensible,’ ‘skillful,’ ‘canny,’ ‘wise,’ ‘prudent,’ ‘careful,’ ‘rational,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘silly,’ and ‘idiotic’” (Bengson and Moffett 2011, 5, cf. Ryle 1949/2009, 15-16). Intellectualism, in these debates, is a view about what makes an act or performance intelligent in the sense that it can be characterized by one of the positive intelligence epithets. An intellectualist says that an act or performance is intelligent only if it is accompanied by explicit propositional thinking. Of course, one might suggest that some types of acts or performances must be accompanied by explicit propositional thinking in order to be intelligent while others need not be so accompanied. This suggests that one might be an intellectualist about specific types of acts or performances, but not about others.

INTELLECTUALISM about type T: For an act or performance of type T to be intelligent, the agent must have a mental state that has propositional content and is appropriately related to the act or performance. (cf. Bengson and Moffett 2011, 6-7)

I shall argue that Stebbing is not an intellectualist about all types of acts or performances. However, I will show that, for Stebbing, in order to deal with a problem *intelligently* one must engage in explicit propositional thinking. Stebbing is therefore an intellectualist about *dealing with a problem*.

INTELLECTUALISM about *dealing with a problem*: In order to deal with a problem *intelligently*, the agent must have a series of mental states that have propositional content and are appropriately related to the agent's response to the problem.

As we shall see, Stebbing's intellectualism about *dealing with a problem* defines much of her approach to logic and critical thinking.

However, it is worth noting that the term 'intellectualism' characterized earlier debates that did not specifically concern what made mental states or performances intelligent. In particular, these debates concerned what made beliefs *true*. Stebbing's early work *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* contributed to these debates. Anti-intellectualism about truth begins with the observation that people have both intellectual and practical needs. As Stebbing later develops the view, a practical need is raised by an immediate problem of action. A theoretical or purely intellectual need might include the desire to answer a question from curiosity. Theoretical needs are not connected to any *immediate* problem of action, although they may be useful for subsequent actions. Stebbing treats the pragmatists as holding that the truth of a belief consists in its meeting one's practical needs. Stebbing (1914, 139-40) thinks that a belief may meet one's practical needs and yet fail to be true.³ So Stebbing is saying that a belief might be false even though it is adequate for all immediate problems of action. For Stebbing, this does not entail that the truth transcends all human interests. Stebbing's view is that people are not satisfied by the mere fact that their beliefs achieve some practical goal; they also want their beliefs to be true (1914, 7). This desire reflects that fact that people have intellectual as well as practical needs. Stebbing (1914, 135) thinks of these two sorts of goals as aspects of a unified person. She contrasts this view with that of Bergson who (on Stebbing's interpretation) distinguishes a rational and a non-rational self. Insofar as she posits distinctively intellectual needs, Stebbing was an intellectualist.⁴

This paper will focus on another way in which Stebbing is an intellectualist: she endorses intellectualism about *dealing with a problem* in the contemporary sense. Stebbing develops her intellectualist account of *dealing with a problem* beginning in 1930. On her view, intelligent dealing with a problem requires reflective thinking. Echoing her earlier view that people have both intellectual and non-intellectual needs, Stebbing holds that a problem may be practical or theoretical. Practical problems arise in the context of the immediate need for action. The agent is called upon to act but lacks the information required to choose or execute the action. Theoretical problems concern how to answer questions that may arise outside of immediate problems of action. A theoretical problem may arise because our expectations are confounded by an experience, because our expectations themselves conflict, or merely because we want to answer a definite question—such as the cause of a fire (Stebbing 1934, 2-3)—but do not immediately know how to discover it.

A problem is identified through a "felt difficulty" (Stebbing 1930/1948, 6). Intelligently dealing with the problem requires reflective or purposive thinking, which Stebbing contrasts with idle thinking and reverie.⁵ Reflective thinking requires ascertaining the relevant features of the problem. Stebbing identifies this with asking questions arising from the problem. The purposive thinker considers answers to these questions. The answers may raise further questions. The aim of this chain of questions and answers is to solve the problem that gave rise to the thinking. The questions involved in reflective thinking need not be explicit. It is sufficient that the thinker is "puzzled about some matter" or "in a questioning frame of mind" (Stebbing 1939/1941, 22-3). Yet, Stebbing is clear that reflective thinking consists in propositions that are asked about, believed, denied, inferred and so forth. As she says, "the unit of logical thinking is the proposition" (Stebbing 1930/1948, 33). Acts of entertaining propositions are events that occur at "definite times" (35). In characterizing the role of propositions in problem solving, Stebbing explicitly references her early discussion of the stages of problem solving. Therefore, insofar as intelligent dealing with a problem requires reflective thinking—entertaining of propositions, Stebbing is an intellectualist.⁶

³The theme continued in an exchange with Schiller in (Stebbing 1913 and Schiller 1912, 1913).

⁴(Bradley 1904: 311) is a prominent defense of intellectualism about truth in this vein. Sait (1916) criticizes Stebbing's work as a form of intellectualism.

⁵This contrast is made in (Stebbing 1930/1948, 1; 1934, 3; and 1939/1941, 18).

⁶The nature and structure of reflective thinking for Stebbing may have derived from Dewey (1910). Dewey and Stebbing both construe the stages of reflective thinking as asking questions and proposing hypotheses to answer these questions and

As with contemporary debates, Stebbing uses several intelligence epithets to characterize intelligent dealing with a problem and reflective thinking, including “logical”, “clear”, “intelligent”, and “wise”. On her view, logical thinking requires that the transitions between one’s thoughts are *relevant* to the problem.

To think logically is to think relevantly to the purpose that initiated the thinking. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 11)

The steps in one’s thought must be “controlled throughout by the initial apprehension of the conditions of the problem” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 6). Poor thinking loses track of the problem. There is “no sign of direction to an end” (*ibid*, 5). In contrast, the steps in a chain of logical thinking are clearly connected to solving the problem that prompted the thinking.

Stebbing offers two examples of intelligent dealing with a problem that I shall return to. Stebbing (1939/1941, 25) gives the example of a child whose train ceases to work. The child greases the mechanism and then finds that it still does not work. In this example, the child had been puzzled by why the train did not work. The hypothesized answer to the question was that the mechanism needed grease. The child then tests the hypothesis and finds that it was wrong. According to Stebbing, both the answer and the test of that answer require intelligence and a great deal of background knowledge gained from experience.⁷ Importantly, this example shows that intelligent dealing with a problem does not entail dealing with the problem successfully. Success requires circumstances to favorably cooperate.

Stebbing (1930/1948, 2-3) offers another case in which a man sees bricks in a rock cliff. The bricks are unexpected. The man hypothesizes that the bricks are related to ruins of an old castle. He thinks that if this hypothesis is correct, there will be passages leading to the bricks from the castle above. Upon investigation, the man does find several shafts leading to passages in the castle ruins. As Stebbing describes the situation, the problem is an intellectual one, the occurrence of “something unexpected” (*ibid*, 3). This raises the question: “why are the bricks in the cliff?” The man offers an hypothesis: the bricks are part of the castle. This hypothesis would explain the unexpected bricks by relating their occurrence “to a situation in which their occurrence would not be unexpected” (*ibid*, 3). The man then further formulates a test to determine if this hypothesis was correct: look for other ruins of a castle. The test does confirm the hypothesis to some degree. Again, the man has brought background knowledge to bear in formulating the hypothesis and in formulating the test of the hypothesis.

The investigation does not stop at the initial question and the proposed answer. The proposed answer leads to further questions about how to test it against other answers.

[A]n intelligent person confronted with a problem will proceed to ask questions and guess at the answer; how various answers lead to other questions and further guesses. (Stebbing 1934, 7)

Stebbing (1930/1948, 6) gives the example of a discussion between Boswell and Johnson that moves from the topic of education to the amount of daylight in northern Scotland during the winter. Even though the topics cover this wide range, the thinking is clear. The clarity derives from the fact that the sequence of questions and answers are all controlled by the apprehension of an initial problem. The rationality of a step in this chain depends on its relevance to the initial problem.

Individual questions are meant to be steps towards the solution to the problem.

A question is intelligent only if an answer to it would resolve the puzzlement that led to the question or would be at least a step towards its solution. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 25)

testing these hypotheses. Both emphasize the role of habits of thought in reflective thinking and the need to assimilate the unexpected features of problems to familiar situations. Stebbing even uses some of the same terminology as Dewey: they contrast “reflective” and “idle” (Dewey 1910, 2) thinking and suggest that reflective thinking originates in a “problem” (Dewey 1910, 9). The problem “controls” (Dewey 1910, 12) the reflective thinking and is identified through a “felt difficulty” (Dewey 1910, 71). Their agreement is also reflected in the fact that, in a later work, Dewey (1938: 491, note 1) favorably cites *A Modern Introduction to Logic*. Thanks to Giulia Felappi (p.c) for suggesting the latter reference.

⁷In addition to Stebbing and John Dewey (mentioned in footnote 6 above), Cook Wilson (1926, 36-9) also emphasizes the role of questions in inquiry and the fact that asking a “real” question requires background knowledge.

Asking an intelligent questions requires taking “note of the conditions set by the problem”. An intelligent answer requires having “discerned within the situation, so far as apprehended, those factors which may be relevant to the solution” (Stebbing 1934, 3). An answer can be intelligent without being right. Stebbing says that the child puzzled by the malfunctioning train is intelligent. The lack of grease on the tracks may have been relevant to the solution based on the child’s limited experience.

Summarizing, Stebbing thinks that intelligent dealing with a practical or intellectual problem requires reflective thinking. In the course of this thinking, one asks a question that discerns the problem’s relevant features and proposes an answer to that question. In asking and answering questions, one is related to propositions. Further questions ask how to test the proposed answer against other possible answers. Asking questions and proposing answers are acts of propositional thinking. Thus, intelligent dealing with a problem does require propositional thinking (Stebbing 1930/1948, 2). The intelligence of any step in the chain of questions and answers depends on the step’s relation to the problem that initiated the thinking.

2 The Charge of Ryle’s Regress

I have argued that Susan Stebbing was an intellectualist about *dealing with a problem*. In particular, intelligent dealing with a problem divides into stages: apprehension of the conditions of the problem, asking relevant questions, proposing relevant answers, and asking further questions about how to test these answers. These stages require propositional thinking. Thus, dealing with a problem intelligently is a performance whose stages require propositional thinking.

Shortly after Stebbing’s death, Gilbert Ryle attacked an *unnamed* intellectualist in “Knowing How and Knowing That” and in *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle’s intellectualist argued against views according to which intelligence requires explicit propositional thinking. The absence of a named figure has led some philosophers to charge that Ryle is attacking a straw man who endorses something “manifestly absurd”.⁸ However, Michael Kremer has recently argued that Stebbing was Ryle’s “proximate target”, though not his only target. Kremer believes that Stebbing’s requirements on intelligent thinking are enough to generate Ryle’s regress.

The example of Stebbing’s intellectualism is sufficient to refute the charge that Ryle was merely attacking a straw man or, in this case, a straw woman. [...] Stebbing’s advice for “practical logicians” seems fitted precisely to Ryle’s critique, and it is plausible that reading her work was a direct impetus for Ryle’s attack on the “intellectualist legend.” (Kremer 2017b, 35)

In order to avoid the regress, Stebbing would have to allow for intelligent action that is not backed by an antecedent propositional thought but by dispositions or habits. Kremer argues that Stebbing cannot allow this without undermining her project of improving the level of intelligent thought and action in her readers.

Kremer sees his account of Stebbing as a vindication of Ryle. Even Stebbing—“an exceptionally clear thinker and writer”—developed a position that “exhibited exactly the kind of circularity and instability that Ryle’s regress argument would lead one to expect” (32). However, if so large a portion of her corpus relies on an assumption that recent philosophers see as “manifestly absurd”, then the result diminishes Stebbing rather than elevates Ryle. Indeed, Kremer argues that Stebbing’s aim in her popular works would be undermined if her account of intelligent action is undermined.

I first consider Stebbing’s position in light of the original considerations that Ryle raises against his intellectualist in “Knowing How and Knowing That”. Ryle’s intellectualist holds that an action is made intelligent by its relation to some intelligent prior mental acts. I argue that Stebbing rejects this claim. I then discuss a version of the regress argument developed by Kremer that focusses on “intelligent dealing with a problem”. I respond that this argument also ascribes to Stebbing positions she does not hold. Properly understanding Stebbing in light of these criticism clarifies how her projects in promoting logical thinking are meant to work.

⁸Kremer (2017b, 19) cites (Stanley 2011, 14) as making this charge.

2.1 The Original Regress

Ryle objected to the identification of intelligence with thinking on the ground that a particular act of thinking can itself be done intelligently or not.

That thinking-operations can themselves be stupidly or intelligently performed is a notorious truth which by itself upsets the assumed equation of “exercising intelligence” with “thinking.” (Ryle 1945, 2)

Ryle’s intellectualist thought that an act was made intelligent by a distinct prior act of thinking. This leads to a regress because these distinct prior acts of thinking must themselves be performed intelligently in order to render the posterior act intelligent. But these prior mental acts—if they are performed intelligently—themselves require antecedent mental acts that are performed intelligently. And so on.

Ryle would offer—as an alternative to this intellectualism—that intelligent action is a matter of dispositional excellence.

when we describe some particular action as clever, witty or wise, we are imputing to the agent the appropriate dispositional excellence. (Ryle 1945, 14; cf. Ryle 1949/2009, 19)

Possessing a dispositional excellence of this kind is what Ryle calls knowledge-how. Ryle opposes knowledge-how to the representation of facts or propositions, which Ryle calls knowledge-that. Knowledge-that can be taught by explicit instruction. Knowledge-how requires training through examples and exercises. It cannot be acquired merely from being told various facts.

Learning-how differs from learning-that. We can be instructed in truths, we can only be disciplined in methods. Appropriate exercises (corrected by criticisms and inspired by examples and precepts) can inculcate second natures. But knowledge-how cannot be built up by accumulation of pieces of knowledge-that. (Ryle 1945, 14 cf. Ryle 1949/2009, 46)

Ryle avoids the regress because he holds that most intelligent actions do not require antecedent intelligent mental actions. Rather, the actions must manifest skill or dispositional excellence, usually resulting from training and practice.

Stebbing applies positive intelligence epithets such as ‘intelligent’ and ‘wise’ to different categories. As we have seen, Stebbing primarily uses ‘intelligence’ to characterize *dealing with a problem*. Intelligently dealing with a problem requires thinking, the intelligence of which is determined by whether it is controlled by the problem. So, Stebbing also regularly calls the reflective thinking that results ‘logical’, ‘clear’, or ‘intelligent’.

But Stebbing also describes persons and their individual acts as intelligent. Stebbing (1939/1941, 24) says, “In so far as a person is thinking clearly he is intelligent.” This suggests that Stebbing views the intelligence of a person is derivative on the intelligence of their thinking. The person will be thinking clearly insofar as they are thinking relevantly to some problem. Neither a person nor their dealing with a problem can be intelligent without the person’s having engaged in some propositional thought in response to the problem. Yet, it is not immediately clear how Ryle’s regress argument can be directly mounted against intelligence as applied to persons or their dealing with a problem.

More relevant to Ryle’s regress argument, Stebbing characterizes individual actions—including acts of thought such as questions and answers—as intelligent. That is, Stebbing sometimes characterizes the individual stages of dealing with a problem as intelligent or not. These characterizations seem most relevant to Ryle’s regress since we may now ask: what makes these individual stages of dealing with a problem—namely, asking and answering questions—intelligent? In particular, in order for it to be intelligent to ask a question or propose an answer, must the agent antecedently have a distinct intelligent act of propositional thinking?

In the next section, I will argue, first, that Stebbing is not committed to the claim that in order for an individual action to be intelligent, the thinker must have engaged in a unique act of thinking that renders the original action intelligent. Thus, Stebbing does not fall victim to the principle generating the regress. I will then argue that Stebbing’s account of reasoning—like Ryle’s—explicitly appeals to dispositional excellence to account for the difference between intelligent actions and other. Finally, I will show that Stebbing’s account does not fall to a more targeted version of Ryle’s regress formulated by Kremer.

2.1.1 Wise Actions

As we have just seen, Stebbing does sometimes characterize individual acts—such as the mental acts of questioning and answering that constitute the stages of dealing with a problem—using positive intelligence epithets such as ‘intelligent’ or ‘wise’. For instance, we saw that for a question to be intelligent, its answer must lead towards a solution to the problem that initiated it (Stebbing 1939/1941, 25). In this section, I will investigate whether Stebbing is committed to the view that each act requires a distinct prior intelligent act of propositional thinking in order to be intelligent. If she were committed to this principle, then she would be susceptible to Ryle’s regress in its original form.

Stebbing is not committed to the view that *every act* must be preceded by a prior intelligent act of propositional thinking in order to be intelligent. A broad theme in Stebbing’s work is balancing the need for reflection with the need for swift action. First note that Stebbing thinks that most of our daily activities are done automatically without reflection and that this is essential for ordinary action. In one of her last works, she says:

Our common daily activities are for the most part carried on without reflection: the paper knife will slit the envelope if we make the usual movements, the upset cup of coffee will stain the tablecloth, the electric light will come on if we turn the switch. Unless we could take such things for granted our more or less orderly lives could not go on as they do. (Stebbing 1943/61, 2)

Stebbing continues that reflective thinking is called upon when someone challenges our beliefs or we find something unexpected. That is, reflective thought is called upon when we face a problem.

Stebbing does at one point say that think that in order for action to be wise, one must have engaged in thought.

No one can act wisely who has never felt the need to pause to think about how he is going to act and why he decides to act as he does. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 18)

However, Stebbing is *not* saying that every wise or intelligent action requires its own distinct set of reflections. One cannot act wisely if one has *never* thought about how one is going to act. But similarly, not every action requires its own distinctive reflection about how to act.

[O]nly a morbid conscience would make out of every demand for decisive action a case of conscience. It is no less true that where our duty lies is not always clear. (Stebbing 1941/1948, 52)

For Stebbing, in order to act wisely one must have engaged in thought *at some point*. But not every intelligent action is a case for conscience.⁹ For Stebbing, this would mean that not every action arises out of conflicting dispositions that calls for a form of “reflexive consciousness” (Stebbing 1941/1948, 180-3). Some intelligent actions may flow from one’s dispositions and do not require their own further thought or reflection.¹⁰

When Stebbing says that a stage in reflective thinking such as a question or proposed answer is intelligent, she typically characterizes this in terms of its relationship to the problem. The question must be a step towards a solution to the problem. Importantly, Stebbing does not say that the thinker is required to think that her answer to her question would lead toward a solution to the puzzlement *before* the question is asked.

⁹It is interesting to compare Stebbing’s account of conscience developed in (Stebbing 1941/1948) with that of (Ryle 1939). Both emphasize the role of dispositions inclining to subject to take action. However, Stebbing emphasizes that the moral demands placed on an individual are often unclear both in theory and application. A person is rarely in a position to know what their duty is.

¹⁰This response to Ryle’s regress may seem to depart from other intellectualists such as Stanley (2011, 16). Stanley holds that for an action to be intelligent, the thinker must trigger appropriate representational states. Stanley evades Ryle’s regress by denying that these triggered states can be assessed for intelligence. On the other side, Stebbing would deny that they need to be backed by prior mental actions of entertaining propositions. However, the difference between Stebbing and Stanley on this point may be merely apparent. As I read him, Stanley would deny that the triggered representational states required to render an action intelligent are themselves actions at all. Thus, he can agree with Stebbing that an action can be intelligent without being backed by prior mental *actions*.

Similarly, when Stebbing (1934, 3) says that intelligent asking and answering of questions requires having “taken note of the conditions of the problem”, she does not suggest that the thinker must entertain a distinct thought to the effect that the question is appropriate to the conditions of the problem.

My reconstruction of Stebbing’s view of intelligent action finds a parallel in the view of moral responsibility that she develops in *Philosophy and the Physicists*. According to Stebbing, an agent is responsible for an action only if the action follows from the agent’s motives, the agent’s character. But some have argued that in order to be morally responsible for an action, one must also be morally responsible for the motive from which it issued. John Wisdom had argued that if you are responsible for an action, then “we shall never come to a time at which a set of purely external circumstances, i.e. not involving you and your will, formed a complete cause of your act”.¹¹ This line of thought initiates a similar regress: if you are responsible for your action, then “the causes of the causes of the causes of . . . of your decisions, however far back they may be pushed in time, must include determinations of your will by your will” (Stebbing 1937/1944, 176).¹² While Stebbing allows that an action for which one is responsible must be caused by facts about the agent’s nature, these facts themselves need not be caused by the agent. “It cannot be denied that I did not spring de novo into the world. Let it be granted that ‘heredity, training and other predetermining causes’ . . . have made me what I am. Surely I am still responsible for what I do” (Stebbing 1937/1944, 180). Analogously, a thought may render an action intelligent without needing a prior thought to render it intelligent.

2.1.2 Skillful agents

For Stebbing, intelligent dealing with a problem divides into stages each requiring the agent to perform mental acts (asking question and proposing answers) with propositional content. I have just argued that Stebbing does not accept the problematic claim of Ryle’s intellectualist, that if an act is intelligent, then it must be preceded by an act with propositional content that renders it intelligent. But there must surely be some connection between the various stages of dealing with a problem. That is, intelligent dealing with a problem requires more than that one’s questions and answers *happen* to address the problem. The sequence of acts must somehow be tied together into a train of thought that address the problem.

It is at this point that I believe Stebbing’s view comes to resemble Ryle’s. Stebbing would agree with Ryle that the acts of thinking that constitute the stages of dealing with a problem must manifest skill or dispositional excellence in order to be intelligent. And, crucially, these skills are not to be identified with factual knowledge. The details of a problem must be apprehended skillfully, relevant questions must be asked skillfully, and relevant answers must be offered skillfully. Skill is a matter of the dispositions of the thinker as they have developed through experience and education. On this interpretation, in order to be thinking intelligently, one must engage in acts of thinking. But these individual acts of thinking do not require antecedent mental actions to be intelligent. Rather, they must be done skillfully, from habits, dispositions, or capacities.

I shall make the case that Stebbing appeals to habit and dispositions to connect the stages of inquiry by appealing to three kinds of considerations. First, I shall show that Stebbing does regard thinkers as having habits of thought. Second, I shall show that Stebbing (like Ryle) thinks that explicit teaching of propositional information is neither sufficient to acquire the habit of thought nor sufficient to make thought intelligent. Third, I will show that Stebbing (again like Ryle) suggests that these habits of thought are to be developed by training and examples.

I now show that Stebbing thinks habits and dispositions are essential to thinking. Habit and dispositions of thought are a central part of Stebbing’s epistemology. In *Logic in Practice*, Stebbing suggests, “There is such a thing as a habit of sound reasoning” (Stebbing 1934, vii). These habits are natural like walking or speaking (Stebbing 1934, 11). According to Stebbing, some ability or habit of correct reasoning is required to

¹¹See (Wisdom (1934, 118), quoted in (Stebbing 1937/1944, 176)). Wisdom believes that a strange form of pre-existence is required to make determinism compatible with moral responsibility.

¹²Wisdom closely associates the notion of moral responsibility to the notion of blameworthiness. For Wisdom, I am only responsible for wrong action if I can be blamed for it. Stebbing disagrees. According to Stebbing, responsibility is only loosely connected with blameworthiness.

learn to engage in intelligent thinking. Ordinary reasoners sometimes reason well without explicit reflection on their principles of reasoning, but sometimes poorly.

No doubt there are a few gifted persons whose critical temper of mind enables them to reason soundly although they have never had occasion to attend to the principles in accordance with which their reasoning proceeds. There may be others too stupid ever to be able to appreciate the logical force of an argument. Most people, however, are between these extremes. Their reasons are sometimes sound, sometimes unsound, but they often do not know why they are the one or the other. It is for such people that this book is intended. (Stebbing 1934, viii)

In *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing further specifies that habits of thought are not merely naturally endowed. Many come from one's position in ordinary life.

Notice, first of all, that we do have habits of thought. Just as our bodies may bear the stamp of our daily occupation, so too may our minds. . . . If it is to be true (as I think it is) that we think with the whole force of our personality, then it follows that our habits of thought will not be unaffected by the way in which we spend our working hours. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 31)

As we shall see, Stebbing thinks that there are good habits and bad habits of thought. In intelligent thinking, the stages of thought—each one of which will be acts with propositional content—will be held together by these habits of reasoning rather than further acts of propositional thought.¹³

I now show that Stebbing (like Ryle) repeatedly denies that acquisition of propositional knowledge in the form of logical principles is *sufficient* for reasoning well. In *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, Stebbing considers the view that the point of logic is to enable thinkers to reason well. On this view, logic is “primarily to be studied as an art” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 475). Stebbing resolutely rejects this position in terms that would not be out of place in Ryle's own work.

To take this view is to misconceive the nature of logic. Rather is it the case that the attempt to study the art of reasoning may lead to the apprehension of logical form. *Knowledge of logical form, on the other hand, no more suffices to make men good reasoners than knowledge of prosodical form suffices to make them good poets.* No one really understands the form of his reasoning, or is able to estimate its validity, unless he can recognise this form when it is exhibited in different subject matters. (Stebbing 1930/1948, 475, emphasis added)

The study of logic begins with examples of good reasoning and then abstracts the notion of logical form from these. The study of logic requires the prior ability to recognize some instances of good reasoning. One studies logic to abstractly characterize the principles of good reasoning. Analogously, reflection on one's ability to produce poetry may be a first step in learning about prosody. And knowledge of prosody may enable one to abstractly characterize some elements of poetry. But knowledge of prosody is not the same thing as competence in poetry.

On Stebbing's view, the study of logic arises out of criticism of reasoning. But the content of a logical formula is very different from what an ordinary person grasps. Logic first systematizes and generalizes the ordinary pattern of inference. It then abstracts further to become the science of possible structures. Stebbing compares the process by which logic abstracts from reasoning to the process by which geometry may have arisen out of and be useful to land surveying. It would be wrong to say that geometry merely captures the content of ordinary land surveying just as it would be wrong to say that logic captures the content of reasoning (Stebbing 1930/1948, 476). Still geometry is useful to land surveying and logic is useful to reasoning.¹⁴

¹³The role of habits is also emphasized by (Thouless 1930/53, chapter 10), which Stebbing cites as inspiring her own works.

¹⁴Beaney and Chapman (2017, §2) likewise argue that Stebbing's conception of logic does not make one fit to reason. “Insofar as the logical forms that the science of logic discovers are norms of thinking, logic can be described as a normative science. But its normativity is not its distinguishing feature, she argues, but is merely a by-product of the fact that norms are what are discovered in logic.” (cf. Douglas and Nassim (2021).)

Yet again in *Logic in Practice*, Stebbing commits to the view that the study of the principles of logic is not sufficient to make one reason well: “The study of logic does not in itself suffice to enable us to reason correctly, still less to think clearly where our passionate beliefs are concerned” (1934, 3). Similarly, in *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing stresses that knowledge of logical fallacies does not suffice to avoid committing although learning about fallacies may enable thinkers to detect them in particular cases (Stebbing 1939/1941, 124ff).

I now turn to how Stebbing thinks that the habit of sound reasoning is acquired. In *Logic in Practice*, Stebbing (1934, vii-viii) does say, “This habit may be acquired by consciously attending to the logical principles of sound reasoning, in order to apply them to test the soundness of particular arguments.” I take this to mean that the habit is acquired both by attending to logical principles and by applying them to examples. The attention to logical principles alone is not sufficient. In *Ideals and Illusions*, Stebbing is more explicit. She compares training in thinking to the training an athlete receives. In both cases, the trainee must acquire more than propositional knowledge. The habit and discipline must be acquired by the trainee’s effort.

An athlete is trained by an expert who shows him how to train his body for the sake of the end in view; but the practice of training is a self-discipline attained by his own effort alone. This will be admitted at once so far as bodily skill is concerned. It is not less true of mental activities, and of the disciplining of all one’s powers as a human person. *Thus we cannot be taught to think; we can only be shown what it is like to think.* (Stebbing 1941/1948, 123ff, emphasis added)

Crucially, for Stebbing, the ability to think well cannot be taught by conveying information. It requires dispositional excellence, what Ryle calls knowledge-how. To learn to think well, one must be trained through practice and examples.

These three features of Stebbing’s account—the existence of habits of reasoning, the fact that they cannot be taught by conveying propositional information, and the fact that they can be taught by training—make it sound like Stebbing simply anticipates with Ryle’s view that habit, dispositions, and capacities are a foundation for attributions of intelligence to the stages of clear thinking and his view that these are to be instilled by training and not merely instruction in facts. On Stebbing’s view, knowledge of logical facts is not sufficient to make one a skilled reasoner. Rather, one must acquire skill through examples and exercises, just as—to use Stebbing’s own examples—one must practice in order to be a skilled poet or to speak a language. Indeed, her logic books are filled with such examples and exercises, drawn from newspapers and ordinary life.¹⁵

2.2 Kremer’s reformulation

To summarize the results so far, on Stebbing’s view, reflective thinking originates in a problem. One deals with the problem intelligently (one thinks intelligently) by identifying the relevant features of the problem, formulating a relevant question, then proposing relevant answers, and finally by proposing tests to decide among these answers. The stages of dealing with a problem are acts of propositional thinking. Thus, in order to deal with a problem *intelligently* one must engage in propositional thinking.

Stebbing’s view is immune to Ryle’s regress as he originally formulated it. Stebbing does think that each stage of dealing with a problem involves acts of explicit propositional thought. Yet, she does not accept the problematic claim of Ryle’s intellectualist, that these acts of explicit propositional thought always require prior acts of explicit propositional thought in order to be intelligent. In order to be intelligent stages of dealing with a problem must be relevant to the problem and connected to it by appropriate habits and dispositions of the thinker.

Yet, Michael Kremer argues that a slightly modified version of Ryle’s argument refutes Stebbing’s account. Rather than focussing on individual acts of thinking—the stages of problem solving, Kremer’s argument directly targets Stebbing’s intellectualism about “intelligent dealing with a problem”. Stebbing is definitely committed to the view that intelligent dealing with a problem breaks into stages of acts with propositional

¹⁵(Chapman 2013, 3-4, 51-5, 103, 107) notes Stebbing’s use of examples and how this was noted by contemporary reviewers as unusual for logic textbooks at the time.

content: identifying its relevant features, asking relevant questions, and proposing relevant answers. Crucially, Kremer claims that undertaking these acts kinds “involve[s] problems to be solved”.

[T]he identification and application of logical principles, and the restriction to relevant considerations, are acts which can be carried out intelligently, or not. *These both involve problems to be solved, and solved intelligently.* Since Stebbing has specified intelligent problem-solving as depending on the three stages of thought identified above—apprehension of the problem, explicit awareness of an intelligent question, and the formulation of an intelligent answer—and since she has characterized intelligence as clear thinking, it follows that intelligent problem-solving must depend on antecedent intelligent-problem solving at a higher level; and the regress will take hold. (Kremer 2017b, 33-4, emphasis added)

For Stebbing, upon being confronted with a problem, one must apprehend the relevant features in order to deal with the problem intelligently. This apprehension will involve explicit propositional thought. However, the transition between the confrontation of a problem and apprehending its logical features, I have argued, is a matter of the habits and dispositions of the thinker. The man who saw the bricks on the cliff apprehended the differences in shape and texture between the bricks and the background cliff. But, I have argued, the man did not need to engage in explicit propositional thinking to transition from the felt difficulty to the apprehension of the facts about the bricks.

Kremer is arguing that this reconstruction is incorrect. It is incorrect because—according to Kremer—Stebbing’s account requires the man to engage in a new act of problem solving. Upon being confronted with the first problem, Kremer thinks that the man on the beach now faces a separate problem: “how do I apprehend the relevant features of the first problem?” Solving that second problem will require acts of propositional thinking, which will raise their own problems Kremer’s version of Ryle’s regress now comes into view.

1. Intelligently dealing with a problem requires *intelligently* apprehending the relevant conditions of that problem and then *intelligently* asking relevant questions and offering relevant answers.
2. Intelligently identifying the relevant conditions of a problem and asking relevant questions each already “involve [distinct] problems to be [antecedently] solved”.
3. Therefore, intelligently dealing with one problem requires *antecedently* apprehending the conditions of a distinct problem and then asking relevant questions and offering answers relevant to the latter problem.

Kremer would suggest that the mental acts required to solve the second problem would “involve their own problems” that need to be dealt with intelligently. And so on. The thinker who sets out to solve a problem intelligently must first solve infinitely many problems. Intelligently solving each of these prior problems would require its own distinct mental acts of apprehending the conditions, questioning, and answering.

Kremer’s central premise is that for *every* mental act of discriminating relevant features of a problem, asking a question, or attempting to answer it, the thinker confronts a *distinct* problem that must be solved. But Kremer’s crucial premise is mistaken.

For Stebbing, a problem arises from something unexpected or from an inability to answer a question. When we do not notice something unexpected or are not bothered by a question, we do not find a problem. Returning Stebbing’s vignette of the man who sees the bricks in the cliff. The problem is precisely that he sees unexpected bricks and asks himself why they are there. The man apprehends the relevant features of the problem when he notices the bricks and frames the question, ‘why are those bricks there?’ If the man had seen only natural scenery, his expectations would have been met. He would not have faced a problem. There is no further problem for the man to think about the natural scenery.

On Stebbing’s view then, intelligent dealing with a problem breaks into stages each with their own propositional content. The transitions between these stages are linked together by habits and dispositions of the thinker. The habits and dispositions are natural for the thinker *given the problem*. For Stebbing,

it is only in the case that the thinker would need to engage in a new act of thinking if there were a new problem. And problems only arise when “our statements are challenged or some unexpected change occurs in our environment.” (Stebbing 1943/61, 3)

By way of contrast, the familiar or expected fails to arouse inquiry.

A situation that seems perfectly familiar fails to arouse inquiry; it is accepted at face value. Accordingly, it does not become the occasion of investigations designed to lead to the acquirement of fresh knowledge. (Stebbing 1930/1948, 7)

I suggest that in the case of the man who observes the bricks, the selection of relevant features of the problem was familiar. The bricks themselves were unexpected in the context of the cliff. There was nothing further unexpected in selecting the relevant details of the situation. That is, upon the “felt difficulty” in the visual image of the cliff, the thinker was disposed to have a thought with propositional content, that there are bricks on the cliff. Similarly, once the problem is noticed, the transitions of thought that Stebbing presents are familiar in this case.

[T]he advance of knowledge is dependent upon the ability to attend to what is unusual and to observe its connections with what is already familiar. (Stebbing 1930/1948, 7)

The man moves from the observation that there are bricks on the cliff to the hypothesis that there was a building. These are two acts of propositional thinking. But drawing the connection between them is a matter of disposition or habit. There is no problem about how to hypothesize that there was a building from the observation. Thus, Kremer’s regress does not arise.

I am suggesting that, in many cases, there is no distinct problem that confronts the thinker when they try to apprehend the features of a problem or reason from these features. This is not to say that there are *never* such problems. It is a key motivation for Stebbing’s overall project that there are many obstacles to thinking clearly, each with a distinctive source in our personality or social situation. These obstacles are problems. And, they do need to be addressed by forming good habits. Indeed, after the passage quoted above, Stebbing says that over-habituation itself is one of the problems that needs to be addressed because of its tendency to numb speakers to small differences. But precisely because she feels the need to focus on specific problems such as over-habituation, Stebbing would seem to deny that every transition in thought automatically creates its own problem. So intelligently dealing with some problems need not raise any new problems that need to be solved first.

3 The Efficacy of Stebbing’s Project

I have argued that Stebbing’s view of clear thinking is intimately tied to the habits and dispositions of the thinker. We have seen that Stebbing is quite explicit that one cannot be taught to think. Clear thinking requires training of the mind just as an athlete must train their body. Kremer sees this as a new problem for Stebbing. Stebbing’s popular works are meant to contribute to an increase in the amount of intelligent thinking and action in her readers. According to Kremer, Stebbing is trying to induce habits by conveying propositional information. In this respect, (Kremer 2017b, 34) accuses Stebbing of “shuffling” by suggesting that thinkers must be governed by implicit knowledge of principles that she can teach in her logic and critical thinking textbooks.

Indeed, Stebbing’s books do provide provide instruction into the principles of logic, probability, and scientific method. These skills are essential to intelligent dealing with a problem because they are useful for identifying problems and testing solutions. Problems are usually unexpected occurrences. One reason an occurrence will be unexpected is that it conflicts with one’s beliefs. Logic enables one to derive consequences from one’s belief. It thereby enables thinkers to identify problems and their relevant features. Similarly, critical problem solving requires one to test one’s proposed solutions to a problem by observable facts. One does so by deriving observable consequences from one’s proposed solution and examining whether these obtain (Stebbing 1930/1948, 234-5). The books inevitably convey propositional information, including the

principles of logic, probability, and so on. Kremer’s worry is that Stebbing is attempting what she herself claims is impossible: she is attempting to induce habits of good reasoning with nothing but propositional instruction in the principles of logic, probability, and so on.

Similarly, some remarks of Ryle’s would suggest that the information conveyed in Stebbing’s work—logical rules and principles—is only useful for a neophyte. Those trained in how to think or how to behave have no need for them. I will develop the worries raised by Kremer and Ryle and show how Stebbing would respond to each of them.

3.1 Logical Principles and Habits

Kremer argues that if Stebbing’s works merely convey propositional knowledge—a “logician’s formula”—then they do not suffice to increase the amount of intelligent thinking and action in her readers.

[E]ven if Stebbing were successful in imparting propositional knowledge of the rules of logic to the general public through her textbooks and popular books, there would be no guarantee that the result would be a rise in intelligent thinking and action. (Kremer 2017b, 34-35)

On Kremer’s reading, Stebbing’s acknowledgment of the role of habits and dispositions in fostering intelligence spells doom for her aims in writing her books. According to Kremer, even if readers acquire implicit factual knowledge of logical principles, Stebbing’s work would be unable to inculcate the good habits required for clear thinking. That is, understanding a rule of logic need not involve knowing an extra fact, but in knowing how to transition between one set of facts to a conclusion.

As we have seen, Stebbing explicitly denies that people can be taught to think. They need to inculcate good habits through training. As we shall see in the next section, Stebbing’s popular works are meant to contribute to that training. Yet, portions of Stebbing’s popular works do discuss and characterize logical principles with the aim of improving the level of thinking in her readers. As we saw above, Stebbing (1934, vii-viii) thinks that the habit of sound thinking can be taught by “attending” to logical principles and applying them in examples. Here Stebbing says that explicit attention to logical principles can aid in the development of a habit of sound reasoning. If Stebbing means that an agent can acquire a habit of sound reasoning *exclusively* by attending to logical principles, then her position is outright inconsistent with her commitment that we cannot be taught to think. Kremer would be correct that these portions of Stebbing’s textbooks do not achieve their function.

Fortunately, Stebbing is not committed to the view that attending to logical principles is the only thing required to develop habits of sound reasoning. The principles are not meant to develop habits from nothing. Stebbing believes that human beings have natural dispositions that govern their thinking just as they have natural dispositions to walk and to speak (Stebbing 1934, 11). In the case of walking or speaking, Stebbing thinks that some may be better than others. Improvement comes by a combination of practice and by copying an explicit standard. According to Stebbing, thinkers are constantly reasoning in response to problems and thereby training in how to think. Attending to explicit grammatical rules can aid in learning a language. Similarly, Stebbing would suggest that thinking may be improved by attending to an explicit standard.

Although we all must think, we seldom think effectively. Our thinking is more likely to be effective if we are aware of the conditions to which efficient thinking must conform. To know these conditions is to have a standard by reference to which we may gauge the success of our efforts. In this way we may learn to avoid some mistakes. (Stebbing 1934, 12)

Stebbing’s claim here is not that learning a particular rule of inference will in itself teach one to think clearly. That is, learning that a particular rule holds is not itself sufficient to inculcate a habit of good reasoning. Rather, the existing habits and dispositions of the thinker interact with the speaker’s attention to the statement of the rule. Now attention to rules is not an absolutely necessary condition to learn to think clearly. Stebbing concedes that there may be agents who could think clearly without attention to the principles. But, as I discussed above, her target audience sometimes reason soundly and sometimes unsoundly (Stebbing 1934, viii).

So, according to Stebbing, people do not come to logic from nothing. They have natural habits of reasoning. These habits are trained in response to the practical and theoretical problems a person constantly faces. Nonetheless, people are sometimes sound reasoners and sometimes unsound reasoners. As an empirical matter, these habits can be improved by agents who explicitly attend to the rules of inquiry and try to apply them in concrete cases. Analogously, attention to the rules of grammar may aid a speaker who is learning a language even if they are not sufficient to learning the language.

Stebbing does not confuse the statement of a rule or logical form with the what the speaker implicitly grasps. In discussing syllogisms, Stebbing explicitly says that ordinary thinkers do not need to be aware that they are reasoning syllogistically, just as one can add numbers without being able to formally state the rule. The form of the syllogism is important because we “sometimes attempt to resolve a doubt in our own minds, or to induce others to agree with us, by showing that a certain proposition that is doubtful, or contested, follows from others propositions whose truth is not in dispute” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 84) and these propositions can be characterized in terms of the syllogism. Identifying the reasoning as a syllogism requires generalization just as the transition from land surveying to geometry requires generalization. But this does not mean that the logical principle is irrelevant to correct reasoning. To give one example, Stebbing suggests that when stated in the abstract the difference between contraries and contradictories is “as a matter of psychological fact, self-evident” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 61). Still, thinkers regularly confuse contraries and contradictories in concrete cases. A thinker will often infer that their own view is true from the falsity of a view incompatible with it. To be able to identify whether a view is the contradictory of one’s view or merely contrary is a matter for “original good sense and the habit of attempting to ascertain what precisely it is that we are asserting” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 62). However, Stebbing thinks that “the formal doctrine of contradiction is not wholly unrelated to ordinary discussion” (Stebbing 1930/1948, 62) and to instilling this habit.¹⁶

3.2 Logical Principles in the Lives of Saints and Sinners

I turn now to the related worry that one might extract from Ryle’s early work. In “Knowing How and Knowing That”, Ryle had downplayed the role of explicit statements of moral obligation and logical rules. According to Ryle, a person who knows how to behave would not need explicit ought-statements because they would alright be disposed to behave correctly.

Moral imperatives and ought-statements have no place in the lives of saints or complete sinners. For saints are not still learning how to behave and complete sinners have not yet begun to learn. (Ryle 1945, 13)

Similarly, if someone knows how to reason, they have no need of explicit statements of logical rules.

Logical rules, tactical maxims and technical canons are in the same way helpful only to the half-trained. (Ryle 1945, 14)

Moral rules are useful only for those who do not know how to behave, and logical rules for those who do not know how to reason.

[A] generally conscientious man might, in certain interference-conditions, not know how to behave, but be puzzled and worried about his line of action. He might then remind himself of maxims or prescriptions, i.e., he might resume, for the moment, the adolescent’s task of learning how to behave. (Ryle 1945, 13)

¹⁶If my conjecture that Stebbing is drawing from Dewey in footnote 6 is correct, then it is relevant that Stebbing’s view coheres with Dewey’s view of the distinction between the process and product of thinking. The process of thinking does not require an explicit statement of method, but rather an “unconscious logical attitude or habit” (Dewey 1910, 113). After the problem is solved, however, “a reconsideration of the steps of the process to see what is helpful, what is harmful, what is merely useless, will assist in dealing more promptly and efficaciously with analogous problems in the future” (Dewey 1910, 113). This reconsideration can lead to a general statement of the method of inquiry. But it would be wrong to conclude that the statement specifies what was implicit in the practice all along.

Moral and logical rules are for those who are puzzled. Only adolescents—and not trained adults—need to attend to them. So one might worry that the sections of Stebbing’s work treat adults like adolescents.

On Stebbing’s view, thinking is assessed for clarity relative to a problem. The apprehension of a problem is precisely a puzzlement. The man was puzzled by the bricks in the cliff. The child was puzzled by the fact that the train did not move. So, Stebbing would agree with Ryle, thinking happens precisely when one is *puzzled* about what to think or do in some circumstance. Thinking involves asking and answering questions, which is not possible for an agent who knows how to behave or what to think in a situation.

Both complete absence of knowledge and complete knowledge about a topic are logically incompatible with the questioning frame of mind. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 22)

Puzzlement and questioning for Stebbing both involve noticing something unfamiliar or unexpected. If one knows nothing about a situation, then one has no expectations to be confounded. On the other hand, if one has complete knowledge in advance (or knows how to behave in all specific situations), then there will be no surprise and no need for reflection.

Stebbing and the early Ryle differ because Stebbing thinks that incomplete knowledge of how to act is pervasive in human life whereas Ryle thinks that it is the condition of adolescents. For Stebbing, people are constantly in situations where they do not know how to behave. Or, they do not know the answer to a question and they cannot tell by direct inspection. In these circumstances thinking is called for. No one is an absolute saint or sinner. Everyone is half-trained. Stebbing therefore argues that explicit statements of goals and principles can aid agents who are constantly confronted by novel and perplexing situations. And, better formulated goals and principles are more likely to combine with existing dispositions to lead to successful thought and action than poorly formulated ones.

In his later works, Ryle’s position becomes more complicated. In *The Concept of Mind* (chapter 2), Ryle emphasizes that knowledge how is a multi-track capacity. That is, knowledge how requires a flexible response to new circumstances rather than rote application of a rule. As the position develops, Ryle (1971, 115) continues to emphasize that thinking requires application of previous instruction to new cases. In thinking, one tries something that one has not been explicitly taught. In some ways, this change in emphasis brings Ryle closer to Stebbing insofar as she had already held that reflective thinking requires novelty, which may be introduced by a confounded expectation or by the simple inability to answer a question.¹⁷

4 The Obstacles to Clear Thinking

We have seen that in her popular works, Stebbing discusses logical principles and fallacies. But this discussion is only a small portion of Stebbing’s work on critical thinking. The vast majority of Stebbing’s text serves a different purpose. Stebbing spends far more time cataloguing and proposing strategies for dealing with *obstacles* to clear thinking.

I do seek to convince the reader that it is of great practical importance that we ordinary men and women should think clearly, that there are many obstacles to thinking clearly, and that some of these obstacles may be overcome provided that we wish to overcome them and are willing to make an effort to do so. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 28)

These obstacles prevent individuals from thinking clearly—that is, relevantly. For Stebbing, this means that individuals fail in apprehending the conditions of a problem or in drawing relevant connections.¹⁸

The obstacles may arise from anything that affects a person. There is no isolated thinking part that operates independently of the human being.

¹⁷Sophisticated treatments of Ryle’s later position include Kremer (2017a), Weatherson (2017), Habgood-Coote (2019), and Hickman (2019).

¹⁸Thouless (1930/53, 95) similarly emphasizes the obstacles to clear thinking: “We tend to think wrongly not so much because we do not know the laws of logic as because there are obstacles in our own minds which make us unwilling to think straight on certain subject.”

We do not think with a part of ourself. Our thinking involves our whole personality. How I think is conditioned by the kind of person I am[.] (Stebbing 1939/1941, 18ff)

One's thinking is affected by one's total situation. The totality of one's personality conditions how one thinks. There are many obstacles to clear thinking, including: "[o]ur fears and hopes, our ignorance (often not easily, if at all, avoidable), our loyalties, these lead us to entertain prejudices which are an effective bar to thinking a problem out" (1939/1941, 30). Because of these features, thinkers acquire bad habits of thought. They ignore relevant details of a problem, draw irrelevant connections, or recoil from drawing relevant connections. By being explicitly aware of these obstacles—by thinking about them—one may take steps to overcome them.¹⁹ I will briefly discuss two broad types of obstacle that Stebbing characterizes: those arising from the thinker's interests and those arising from the thinker's limited access to and capacity to store information.

One's interests give rise to one kind of bad habit. Stebbing (1939/1941, 31) argues that we have some cherished beliefs which we "wish to maintain" because they are "pleasant to hold." These beliefs may allow one to maintain one's social position or may merely provide comfort in a harsh world. Cherished beliefs can lead to prejudices. Stebbing defines prejudice as "accepting without evidence a belief for which it is reasonable to seek evidence" (Stebbing 1939/1941, 30). Stebbing gives as an example the belief in the superiority of one's country or race. The role of one's interests is essentially hidden: "[i]gnorance of the connexion between the belief and the emotional interest inducing the belief is an essential element in being prejudiced" (Stebbing 1939/1941, 33).²⁰

In addition to forming unjustified beliefs, such prejudices lead thinkers to refrain from drawing relevant conclusions or to ignore features relevant to their problem. Stebbing discusses this phenomenon in a number of cases. I will briefly mention three. Stebbing (1939/1941, 26) discusses problems Aristotle himself noticed in his attempts to justify slavery. She suggests that Aristotle took for granted that there would be a way of explaining his moral principles that would not require "a radical alteration of his mode of life". This made Aristotle refrain from drawing the relevant conclusion that slavery is immoral. Similarly, in her discussion of Pericles's funeral oration defending Athenian democracy, Stebbing (1941/1948, 149) observes "Pericles did not forget the slaves; he has never remembered them". Finally, Stebbing observes that British politicians and newspapers never applied the principles underlying their criticism of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia to British behavior in India. In all three cases, thinkers do not fully appreciate relevant features of their problem or do not extend their principles to relevant cases because it would affect their form of life. Again, the relevance of the thinkers' interests to their mode of thought would not have been transparent to them.

Stebbing recommends habits for scrutinising cherished beliefs. For instance, she recommends searching for the psychological origins of one's belief.

It is a good habit to ask, with regard to our cherished belief, "Now, how did I come to think that?" (Stebbing 1939/1941, 30)

Once the source of the belief is formed is identified, Stebbing recommends one should examine what evidence is in fact available.

Limitations in finding and storing information can also lead to bad habits of thought. Heuristics are necessary for taking in familiar situations but they can also numb speakers to new information or problems. A doctor may look for telltale signs of influenza to explain a patient's symptoms but miss symptoms that indicate another condition.

The familiar use of language which enables us to refer, sometimes by a single word, to a complex situation, may hinder us from noting unexpected features that are nevertheless present. For instance, if a doctor observing a set of symptoms were to label the disease from which the patient was suffering as "influenza", and were then content to treat the diagnosis as complete, he might be

¹⁹Stebbing offers concrete strategies for developing *habits* for detecting ambiguities in reasoning (Stebbing 1934, 77); determining whether an argument really establishes its conclusion (Stebbing 1934, 84); assessing arguments by analogy (Stebbing 1939/1941, 95); and assessing arguments for general claims by unrepresentative samples (Stebbing 1939/1941, 148).

²⁰Thouless (1930/53, 98) also emphasizes that ignorance is an essential ingredient of prejudice.

led into a serious error. It might be necessary to look for some symptoms not commonly associated with the other set, which would lead him to make a fresh diagnosis. (Stebbing 1930/1948, 7)

In *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing (1939/1941, 52) characterizes the related phenomenon of potted thinking, using ‘compressed statements’ which ‘save us from the trouble of thinking’. Stebbing recommends periodically reviewing the principles by which the heuristic or potted statement was justified. She also recommends attention to changed circumstances (Stebbing 1939/1941, 60).

Another sort of limitation arises from the fact that thinkers must rely on the testimony of others and the press in particular. In some cases, governments control the press and use it to disseminate explicit propaganda. Even when the press is not controlled by the government, it is often controlled by a “comparatively small number of persons” (Stebbing 1939/1941, 70-1). The relatively narrow range of interests of those who control the press means that only a narrow range of points of view are characterized. Information is presented in accordance with these points of view. Stebbing therefore says that the control of the press is an obstacle to acquiring the information necessary to reason to some purpose about public matters.

Although individuals on their own cannot completely overcome this obstacle, they can mitigate its effects through good habits. For instance, Stebbing recommends “consulting newspapers representing different political views” (Stebbing 1939/1941, 175). Doing so will broaden the range of evidence and counterevidence available to the thinker.

5 Diagnosing Failure

I turn now to a final sort of argument for construing Stebbing as an intellectualist of the censurable kind. The criticism arises from the fact that Stebbing believes that the problems in the world are *intellectual* problems, at least in part. Stebbing opens *Ideals and Illusions* by observing that there has been “failure in our national life” that makes her feel “ashamed.” According to Stebbing, the source of this failure is unclear: “we know we have failed, but we do not quite know wherein exactly we have failed” (Stebbing 1941/1948, vii). Stebbing’s aim in the work is to address what she takes to be at least one cause of the failure: the failure of the British citizens to make clear their ideals.

I am concerned almost entirely with one only of these causes—our unwillingness to make definite to ourselves what it is we believe to be worth seeking, the world today is in discordance with our desires. What is it that we desire, or, to use a popular expression, what do we believe to be the ends for which it is worth while to live? (Stebbing 1941/1948, viii)

Stebbing wishes to characterize the ends for which she lives because she saw a *problem*. The world in 1941 was profoundly at odds with how she (and many others) wanted it to be. She believed that one source of this problem was that citizens were not clear about what they wanted. Clarity about the aim of one’s actions, she thought, was a first step in acting to build a world more in line with what she wanted.²¹ In *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Stebbing similarly argues that clear thinking is necessary for the performance of “due deliberation” before citizens record their votes (Stebbing 1939/1941, 11).

According to Laird, Ryle (as characterized by Kremer), and Wittgenstein (as reported by Rhees), Stebbing’s diagnosis of the problems of her time is mistaken. On their views, the failures of national life that Stebbing describes arose from causes outside of the intellectual sphere. So Stebbing’s efforts to contribute to alleviating the problems will inevitably fail. Laird sees a failure in moral resolution rather than moral vision. Considering how Ryle would reply to Stebbing, Kremer sees a lack of education of the whole person as the cause of the problems. Finally, Wittgenstein—according to Rhees—doubts that the motivation for Fascist “irrationalism” is its intellectual appeal. Stebbing is accused by all three of over-emphasizing the intellectual causes of the problems she identified. I will discuss how Stebbing’s work addressed these three criticisms separately. I first argue Stebbing offers strong reasons for believing that Laird is mistaken about

²¹Stebbing does not think that clear thinking is the only requirement for improving the world. Indeed, the epigraph for *Logic in Practice* is this quote from Ezra Pound: “No book can do ALL a man’s thinking for him. The utility of any statement is limited by the willingness of the receiver to think.”

the nature of problem. I then argue that both Kremer's Ryle and Rhees's Wittgenstein wrongly separate the thinking part of the person from the remainder, whereas Stebbing correctly sees that thinking is an activity done by the whole person.

5.1 Moral Knowledge and Moral Resolution

Laird argued against Stebbing that what he saw as the "moral deterioration" in the beginning of the 20th century was primarily due to a lack of steadfast commitment to moral principles and not due to ignorance or confusion about those principles. Laird criticizes Stebbing (1941/1948, 128) for holding that moral progress is to be measured firstly by assessing an ideal and only secondarily by how steadfastly these ideals are pursued. According to Stebbing, the prevalence of Fascist and Nazi ideals is a greater problem than weakness of will by advocates of democracy.²²

Stebbing pre-empted Laird's complaint in two ways. First, she rejects its presuppositions. Laird's complaint assumes that there is substantial agreement about ends. Yet, Stebbing offers convincing arguments that there is disagreement about ends. *Ideals and Illusions* aims at articulating different conceptions of a good life, including a broadly democratic approach and Fascist approaches. She articulates opposed conceptions of the good life.

I am convinced that we are too unready to reflect upon our conduct for the sake of making explicit the principles upon which we act. ... I cannot agree with Matthew Arnold's dictum to the effect that it is not difficult to know what we ought to do but the difficulty lies in doing it. (Stebbing 1941/1948, 53)

Stebbing discusses cases in which difference in opinion about the good would lead to different actions if pursued steadfastly. Most immediately, Stebbing would argue that Fascists and Nazis are not merely misapplying ideals that they share with advocates of Democracy. Steadfast implementation of Fascist and Nazi ideals would—and did—lead to profoundly evil results. Moreover, even advocates of democratic ideals regularly underestimate their demands.

Laird did not agree that the primary difference between advocates of Nazism and Democracy is in their ideals. In an earlier review of *Ideals and Illusions*, Laird had complained Stebbing praises the democratic ideal too highly and criticizes the Nazi ideal too harshly.

For instance, her pictures of the Nazis and of their opponents seem to me to be a little melodramatic. The bad ideals are so very bad, and the good ideals, though often sickly, are so unquestionably splendid. (I am not talking about the Nazis' deeds; but Miss Stebbing, mistakenly I think, although the antithesis asks for trouble, puts ideals and ideas before their execution.) (Laird 1942, 195)

From this distance, it is difficult to see any merit to Laird's view that the problem with Nazism was in its execution and not in its ideal. The deeds were horrible because the ideals were horrible.²³ Stebbing's project in *Ideals and Illusions* was, in part, to explain why people were attracted to this horrible ideal.

There is another way in which Stebbing's work preempts Laird's criticism. Stebbing observes that there is in fact a high degree of commitment to ideals. Stebbing points out that many political arguments are framed in terms of abstract notions such as 'liberty', 'democracy', 'the nation', 'the people', 'sound money', and so on. According to Stebbing, participants in these arguments often have only a hazy grasp of what they mean. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of political passion. Human beings are willing to endure and inflict great suffering on account of them.

²²Stebbing (1944) explicitly suggests that ideals are to be judged in part on whether they can realistically be followed by the mass of ordinary people.

²³The nature of the Nazi ideals were not completely unknown in Britain at the time, with the publication of works such as (Lorimer 1939). Stebbing's praise of the Democratic ideal is also seriously attenuated. One of her goals in *Ideals and Illusions* is to explain the appeal of Fascism and Nazism. This requires her to search for unattractive features of the Democratic ideal. For instance, Stebbing (1941/1948,159) says: "Certainly the discussion [in a Democracy] will often be irrelevant, unnecessarily lengthy, and at times downright boring."

The chief danger of getting into a habit of thinking in abstractions is that we take the words to have meaning and yet do not know what it is these words stand for... human individuals are prepared to die or be tortured or to kill or torture other individuals for the sake of liberty without knowing what “liberty” means. (Stebbing 1939/1941, 139)

It hardly needs to be said that Stebbing was right about how much of the suffering inflicted and endured throughout the 1930s and 40s arose out of steadfast commitment to ideals. These included sound money policies in dealing with the depression or commitment to Fascism or Nazism. Stebbing would say that the problem was with the ideals or their formulation, and not that people were unwilling to sacrifice to realize them.

5.2 Education of the Person

Kremer speculates that, by the end of his career, Ryle had a better diagnosis of the failures of national life around the time of the second world war. According to Kremer, Ryle’s ultimate view is that moral improvement should prioritize education of the whole person rather than treat the failure as arising either from lack of factual knowledge or of knowledge how. That is how Ryle would address the “political concerns” that Stebbing raises.

[W]hat is required is fostering the development of character and virtue—neither a matter of greater knowledge-that, nor of greater skill, or knowledge-how, but an education of the whole person. (Kremer 2017b, 36)

But if this is right, it brings Ryle closer to Stebbing’s position. As we have seen, Stebbing’s holds that thinking is an activity of the whole person. This is something she repeats several times. Stebbing therefore agrees with Ryle, on Kremer’s reconstruction. Indeed, Stebbing goes so far as to say that the relevance of the whole of one’s personality to one’s thinking “is the assumption upon which this book is based” (Stebbing 1939/1941, 146). As we have seen, Stebbing thinks that intelligent thinking requires manifesting good habits of thought and avoiding bad habits of thought. These habits arise from one’s nature, from one’s social positions, and the activities of one’s daily lives. Stebbing thinks that one cannot acquire these habits without training. In all of this, Ryle and Stebbing agree.

However, Stebbing would differ from Ryle on a point of emphasis. Although, as we have seen, Stebbing thinks that one’s practice in daily life influences one’s thinking, she also thinks that “how a man thinks so in the end he acts” (1941/1948, 143). That is, changes in one’s ideals are sometimes necessary to bring about individual and social change. This is not to say that one can change one’s beliefs or ideals by purely intellectual means. As we have seen, one needs to develop good habits, and this may involve changes in one’s daily occupation. Nor is this to say that changing one’s ideals is the only thing required to make the world better. One also needs power. But, Stebbing (1941/1948, 15, 215) is keen to emphasize that not only power, but also ideals or beliefs, are necessary for bringing about a better world.

5.3 Fascist Irrationalism

The final version of this challenge arises from Wittgenstein’s point (reported by Rhees) that the appeal of Fascist “irrationalism” does not lie in deceiving people with logical fallacies. Identifying these fallacies—Wittgenstein is reported to have argued—will not change their commitments. Stebbing therefore suffers a misconception. According to Rhees, Wittgenstein contrasted attempts to combat antisemitism by argumentation with “the way anti semitism had disappeared in Russia by a change in the form of society” (2015, §21.20).

Yet, Wittgenstein seems mistaken about Stebbing’s aims when she discusses Fascism. Stebbing is not trying to convince some Fascist interlocutor. She is not trying to provide a manual for arguing with Fascists. Stebbing describes the goal of the Nazi moral code as “loyalty to the Leader” and “unquestioning obedience without knowledge” (Stebbing 1941/1948, 142). Stebbing believes that these war-like goals appeal to “something deeply rooted in human nature”.

The “roll of the war drums” calls us, and duty is more eagerly and strenuously performed because in doing our war like duty we seem to be no longer men but rather heroes. Moreover, the lust for power, the joy of cruelty, the pride of dominance, still have their attraction. (Stebbing 1941/1948, 151)

Stebbing worries that advocates of democracy themselves are sometimes motivated by these war-like impulses but express themselves as advocating for “freedom”. She worries that people view freedom as the *great cause* for which they are fighting, and don’t properly attend to what freedom requires. As a result, they conflate defeating the enemies with achieving the goals of freedom and democracy: “to lose the war will mean that democracy is overthrown. But to win the war does not mean that democracy is saved” (*ibid.*, 152).

Stebbing believes that “more support the ideal of Democracy than are aware of what it entails” (*ibid.*, 217). This leads to two kinds of problem. First, those who support the ideal of Democracy do not know how to achieve its goals. They do not know what is required to “build a better world”.

Second, misconceptions about the ideal of Democracy as materialistic or selfish—Stebbing believes—make Fascist criticisms of Democracy sound plausible. As Stebbing construes Fascist and Nazi criticisms of Democracy, it “sets before men a purely selfish goal. . . . For them democracy spells plutocracy, and happiness means only ostentatious luxury” (1941/1948, 152).

But, according to Stebbing (1941/1948, 160), Democracy is a demanding ideal. It demands spiritual virtues such as self-discipline, submission to laws, and service to others. Moreover, achieving Democracy requires the free development of individuals. This free development involves them forming opinions for themselves with relevant input from their community.

I, for my part, must exert myself to learn what I need to know and to think freely. This is difficult, but if I fail I am not a member of a democracy even if I am a citizen in a State that is democratic despite my failure. (Stebbing 1941/1948, 159)

So Stebbing emphasizes clear thought to give a picture of what to do *after* Nazism is defeated. This is reflected in Stebbing’s (1941/1948, 132) choice of the following passage from E. M. Forster (1940) as an epigraph to her chapter contrasting the ideals of democracy and Fascism: “To be sensitive — to have an open mind — these are valuable qualities even in war-time, whatever the wireless says. Do they help us to conquer the Nazis? They don’t. They are weapons in a larger and a longer battle.” Stebbing thinks that the difficulty of internalizing the goal of Democracy—that all human beings should be free and happy—is one cause of the appeal of Fascism.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein’s own example of how to overcome irrationalism might strike us now as misinformed. The early Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union were less antisemitic than many of their opponents.²⁴ But, antisemitism certainly had not “disappeared” in the Soviet Union by the time of Wittgenstein’s conversation with Rush Rhees, or—if it had disappeared—it reappeared shortly thereafter.²⁵ One of Stebbing’s stock examples is that it is very difficult for the average person outside of Russia in the 1930s to understand what was happening there. She cites the fact that different reports from visitors to Russia cited different facts and that the reporters themselves have political agendas. Stebbing would likely interpret Wittgenstein’s misimpression as resulting from such one-sided reports.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that Stebbing’s conception of intelligent dealing with a problem is intellectualist. Intelligent dealing with a problem requires propositional thought. Yet, it is not susceptible to Ryle’s regress. Indeed, Stebbing anticipates many elements of Ryle’s philosophy when she emphasizes that one’s ability to think

²⁴See (Gerwarth 2016, 90-1) and (Judt 2011, 260-262).

²⁵The article does not give definite date for this conversation, but the collection of conversations took place between 1939 and 1950. For discussion of Stalinist antisemitism in the Soviet Union, see (Judt 2011, 263-270) and (Snyder 2011, Chapter 11).

well depends upon one's habits, dispositions, and all of the various features that make up one's personality. The degree of agreement even raises the possibility that Stebbing had an influence on Ryle's views.²⁶

Despite her agreement with Ryle, Stebbing still assigns a prominent place to explicit thought in building a better world. This is not a confusion on her part about the need for steadfastness in pursuing the democratic ideal or the source of Fascism, but part of her view about what is required to make a world fit for human beings.

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²⁶One possible route of transmission would be through Stebbing's student, Margaret MacDonald, whose friendship with Ryle has recently been discussed in (Kremer forthcoming).

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