

Susan Stebbing and the Vienna Circle on Moral Philosophy

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Abstract:

Susan Stebbing, who is rarely mentioned in the history of analytic philosophy, was a prominent figure in the Unity of Science movement and maintained relationships with leading members of the Vienna Circle. This paper compares Stebbing's conception of moral philosophy to those of Carnap, Neurath, and Schlick.

At first glance, the conceptions of moral philosophy held by Stebbing and the Vienna Circle differ widely, as Stebbing rejects the logical empiricist standard view of moral philosophy generally ascribed to the Vienna Circle. What we now call normative or substantial ethics – and what is ruled out by the standard view – is an essential part of moral philosophy in Stebbing's conception. A closer look reveals, however, that Schlick shares this view. He practiced normative and applied ethics on a eudaimonistic basis.

The discrepancies further diminish once more general questions are addressed. Stebbing, Carnap, Neurath and Schlick endorse the perspective of scientific humanism. They are convinced that it is the task of humanity itself to improve human life conditions and that science is one of the most valuable means to this improvement.

Therefore, Stebbing is close to the Vienna Circle in her conception of moral philosophy once the Vienna Circle is no longer reduced to a general rejection of normative ethics, and scientific humanism is taken into account. New insights may be gained by reconsidering the Ethical Movement.

I Introduction

Susan Stebbing (1885–1943) was the first female professor of philosophy in Great Britain, a leading figure of the so-called Cambridge School of Analysis, co-founder of the journal *Analysis*, and president of the Mind Association as well as of the Aristotelian Society. Despite

her importance, she is rarely mentioned in the history of analytic philosophy (see Chapman 2013 as a recent exception). Therefore, it is not common knowledge that Stebbing was also a prominent figure in the Unity of Science movement and that she maintained relationships with Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, and Moritz Schlick, the “triumvirate” of the Vienna Circle.

The aim of my paper is to compare Stebbing’s conception of moral philosophy to those of Carnap, Neurath, and Schlick. As this cannot be done thoroughly in a short paper, I will concentrate on a few fundamental aspects. In a first step, I will outline the logical empiricist standard view of moral philosophy generally ascribed to the Vienna Circle and compare it to Stebbing’s conception. At this first glance, the Vienna Circle and Stebbing seem to hold very different views. In the following sections I will show, however, that the discrepancies are not so fundamental once more general questions are addressed. Stebbing shares interesting and hitherto disregarded convictions with Carnap, Neurath, and Schlick, ones which are worth reconsidering.

II A First Glance: The Logical Empiricist Standard View of Moral Philosophy and Stebbing’s Conception

The standard view of logical empiricist moral philosophy is held to be characterized by the acceptance of descriptive empirical research – but this research is not regarded as genuine moral philosophy – and the rejection of normative and substantial ethics. Metaethics remains the only legitimate way of doing moral philosophy. This is generally considered to be the view of the Vienna Circle.

How does Stebbing relate to this? She states her conception very clearly in *Men and Moral Principles* (1944). In this publication, she not only expresses a high opinion of moral philosophy, calling it the “most difficult of philosophical studies” (p. 3), but also ascribes to this discipline more than analysis (p. 4). Although logic, rationality, and clarity may be important for moral life, as she demonstrates in *Logic in Practice* (1931) and *Thinking to*

Some Purpose (1939), she contends in *Men and Moral Principles* that moral philosophers “must be concerned with the ways in which men live” (p. 4). What we now call normative or substantial ethics – and what is ruled out by the standard view – is an essential part of moral philosophy in Stebbing’s conception. To be more specific, it is an important task “to formulate ideals worth living for and to attempt to make clear principles which may afford guides for action” (p. 4). In *Ideals and Illusions* (1941) Stebbing lays out her grave concerns about the pain and misery of human beings and ponders which ideals might change the world for the better. She contends that some ideals are evil and some rest on illusions. Moral philosophy should provide counterpoint ideals, good ideals without illusions, as we might put it.

In short, at first glance, the conceptions of moral philosophy held by Stebbing and the Vienna Circle differ widely. But let us now take a second look by starting a closer comparison with Carnap’s thinking, followed by Neurath’s and Schlick’s.

III A Second Look: Taking Scientific Humanism and Dissenting Opinions into Account

Carnap (1891–1970) is the member of the Vienna Circle whose conception of moral philosophy is closest to the standard view. In his well-known article “Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache” (“Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language”, 1931/32) one finds nearly all features of this view.¹ In the English-speaking world, this perspective was widely spread by Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) and Carnap’s own *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (1935). The later contains the published version of three lectures given by Carnap at the University of London during his first visit to Great Britain in 1934.

¹ Prior to this position, Carnap was more closely associated with phenomenological and Neo-Kantian approaches regarding questions of value (see e.g. Mormann 2006, Siegetsleitner 2014a).

As an interesting aside, Carnap gave these lectures on none other than Stebbing's invitation, which he also mentions in his autobiography. However, apart from a brief acknowledgement of her person, he does not report any interesting discussions with her, as he does, for example, for Russell, Ogden and Ayer (Carnap 1963, pp. 33–34). Given Stebbing's expertise and renown, this oversight seems more than a little curious.

That aside, as far as the logical empiricist standard view is concerned, Carnap and Stebbing obviously do disagree. However, this is not the end of the story.

On a more general level, the Vienna Circle shared a humanistic version of morality and moral philosophy, which can already be found in the Circle's manifesto *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung. Der Wiener Kreis. (Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle, Neurath/Hahn/Carnap 1929)*. Later it was formulated by Carnap in his autobiography as a combination of three views: (1) All that "can be done to improve life is the task of man himself"; (2) humanity is able to avoid much of contemporary suffering and improve life conditions; (3) science is one of the most valuable means to this improvement (Carnap 1963, p. 83). Carnap understood his logical work as a contribution to this kind of humanism. This general scientific humanism was certainly shared by Stebbing, as can be seen, for example, through her conviction that morality does not require otherworldly sanctions or religion (see e.g. her "Ethics and Materialism" 1939).

Nevertheless, it is possible to subscribe scientific humanism without endorsing the standard view, as is the case with Stebbing. In conclusion, Stebbing and Carnap share the humanistic approach but not the standard view.

I will now turn to Otto Neurath (1882–1945). When Neurath had to flee from the Netherlands to England in 1940, it was Stebbing and others who succeeded in getting him released from an internment camp and helped him to start a new life in Oxford (see Sandner 2011). Stebbing had been engaged in Neurath's major project, the Unity of Science movement, since 1935, which is how they had become friends.

In their philosophical and moral outlook, Neurath and Stebbing not only share an enthusiasm for the philosophy of science but also the conviction that science and philosophy could make a major difference to people's living conditions and happiness. Their philosophical work has a moral purpose with scientific humanism as the common background. Both worked against harmful speculations. Neurath sees Stebbing as an ally when he points out: "It is not only by accident that L. Susan Stebbing wrote on the one hand a book criticizing highly metaphysical speculations of modern physicists and on the other hand her *Thinking to some Purpose* and her *Ideals and Illusions*" (Neurath 1941, p. 132).

Whereas, however, Stebbing admitted that normative ethics plays an important role in accomplishing this task, Neurath was very reluctant to accept this idea. Although both were concerned about the miserable living conditions of men and women, Neurath restricted his academic work to providing tools for the social sciences in order to describe and finally improve these circumstances. This effort is once again rooted in scientific humanism, but Neurath still endorsed the logical empiricist standard view of moral philosophy. Nevertheless, he let Carnap know: "In our movement I sometimes have the feeling that some members avoid discussing problems of decision, action etc and are using analysis as a kind of escape from life. THAT IS NOT MY APPROACH" (Neurath to Carnap, 22 September 1945, Wiener Kreis Archiv, Haarlem, no. 223, cited from Siegetsleitner 2014a, p. 250, n. 329). Stebbing certainly did not avoid such discussions, nor did Schlick.

Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), the founder of the Vienna Circle, deviates from the standard view in fundamental respects. His position is very close to the moral philosophy of Stebbing, with whom he got acquainted at a conference in London in 1932. In a letter to Carnap he admits that she is the most reasonable philosopher he had met in London (Schlick to Carnap, 3 December 1932, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh, Rudolf Carnap Collection, no. 029-29-01, see Friedl/Rutte 2013, p. 148, n. 5).

Schlick followed the ideal of a wise man, suggesting a worthwhile way of life to people. His first book, *Lebensweisheit (The Wisdom of Life, 1908)*, already deals with ethical questions. In 1930 he published *Fragen der Ethik (Problems of Ethics, English translation 1939)*, which mostly is about moral psychological issues. The last chapter, however, proclaims a moral principle on a eudaimonistic basis: “Be ready for happiness!” (Schlick 1939, p. 187) On the same basis, his posthumously published work *Natur und Kultur (Nature and Culture, 1952)* discusses questions of politics, war, economics, law as well as technology. It belongs in the category of applied ethics. This demonstrates that Schlick and Stebbing not only share the general outlook of scientific humanism but also the legitimacy of normative ethics, therein differing from the logical empiricist standard view of moral philosophy.

What may come as a surprise to some, Schlick used the expression “applied ethics”. “Applied ethics” was a common term in the so-called Ethical Movement which was of particular importance to Stebbing and the Vienna Circle.

IV. A short Remark on the Ethical Movement

The Ethical Movement was initiated in the last decades of the 19th century. Its aim was a secular humanist moral life, moral education and philosophy. In 1890 the movement launched the *International Journal of Ethics*, known as *Ethics* today (see Siegetsleitner 2014b).

Stebbing gave ethical lectures at the Sunday meetings of the South Place Ethical Society (e.g. on 10 December 1939 and 19 April 1942); Carnap and Schlick were members of the Ethical Community in Vienna. All of them took an active part in this movement. This important relationship is still in need to be taken into consideration when we scrutinize the relationship between Stebbing and the Vienna Circle, especially when it comes to moral philosophy.

V Summary

In summary, the conceptions of moral philosophy held by Stebbing and the Vienna Circle differ widely at first glance, as Stebbing rejects the logical empiricist standard view of moral

philosophy. A closer look reveals, however, that even Schlick does so, as well. Moreover, Stebbing, Carnap, Neurath, and Schlick share the perspective of scientific humanism. Therefore, Stebbing is close to the Vienna Circle in her conception of moral philosophy once the Vienna Circle is no longer reduced to a general rejection of normative ethics, and scientific humanism is taken into account. New insights may be gained by reconsidering the Ethical Movement.

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