# STEBBING ON 'THINKING TO SOME PURPOSE'

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*Susan Stebbing's* Thinking to Some Purpose *is analysed along the lines of contemporary efforts in critical thinking, and some of the problematized media material of her time. It is concluded that what Stebbing recommends is difficult to achieve, but worth the effort.*



In *Thinking to Some Purpose*, Susan Stebbing's work on the uses of critical thinking and informal logic, she mentions in one of her opening paragraphs the British penchant for muddling through, and then remarks: 'Is it not odd that an incapacity for clear thought should be deemed glorious?'[1] Her goal is to eradicate this cherished trope.

Stebbing is concerned about the fact that she sees a great deal of confusion between abstract conceptualization in general and logical thinking. She believes that the failure to make this distinction, and to forward it adequately, leads to a less than clear presentation of facts to the public, and she finds that reprehensible in what purports to be a democratic society.[2] Interestingly, Stebbing also sees what she thinks are culturally influenced beliefs about conceptualization and logic: for purposes of illustration, she cites comments along these lines from both British and French political figures.[3] All in all, Stebbing finds herself in the position of attempting to promulgate the notion that clarity of thought and argumentation is a necessary public good, as well as a private and personal benefit.

What makes Stebbing's foray into critical thinking and introductory logic, at least on one construal, so interesting is that she is paramount among those who are willing to tolerate the notion that we act within a given set of prejudices

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or fixed beliefs, and that to fail to acknowledge this is to err. She is also very astute in taking into account that what we standardly term 'thinking' is, indeed, thinking to some purpose – in other words, it is thought with action attached as an object. Thus, from the outset, Stebbing is more realistic in her appraisal of how critical thought is linked to action, and how all of that is linked to an individual's past. This gives her work a remarkable flavour. It will be the argument of this article that, although somewhat flawed, Stebbing's work is an overlooked contribution to the project of conceptualization with respect to social justice, since it clearly aims at a more democratic society.

## I

At an early point in her work, Stebbing notes that 'We do not think with a part of ourself. Our thinking involves our whole personality.'[4] Stebbing is perhaps one of the few to have tackled the overall concept of critical thinking in such a way as to allow for the notion that personal prejudices and attitudes have a great deal to do with our ability to conceptualize – indeed, they may be crucial. It is a refreshing part of her work to note that she not only makes use of examples from the daily life of her time, but she does not try to insist that it is a virtue of work on a particular topic to try to divorce oneself as much as possible from one's preconceptions on the topic. Her stance is very much the opposite; she understands that preconceptions play a role, and she is determined not to ignore them. In an early chapter of her work titled 'Thinking and Doing', she writes:

> [W]e should not be puzzled unless we already know something about the problem that sets us on thinking and are aware that there is more to be known about it … [E]ven in the exposition of a familiar topic, to judge by my own experience, the expositor may suddenly find himself confronted by a fresh question.[5]

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In other words, what Stebbing means by thinking to some purpose is that we take the information that we already have – even though it may well be the case that not all of it is accurate – and then begin to move forward from there. In this she is one of a few who would articulate the issues at hand in that way. Although some of the material that she takes as exemplary is now out of date (and even, occasionally, offensive by today's standards), Stebbing is remarkably adept at noting that we can use our emotional involvement in a topic to good purpose, since that very emotional involvement, even with somewhat 'blinkered' thought, to use her expression, may propel our inquiry.[6]

One difficult area in Stebbing's work that seems to present itself from the start, however, has to do with the scrutiny that she would invite us to use upon our own beliefs, and the simultaneous awkwardness and necessity of employing such scrutiny. In other words, an objection to the course that Stebbing takes might note that, since her aim is clarity of thought (and since she repeatedly says that it is necessary for good governance), she may actually be too lenient about getting us to divorce ourselves from our beliefs, or perhaps too optimistic about our ability to do so. Admittedly, this is a fraught area, and it is one on which she spends a great deal of time at the beginning of her book. As she says, 'Notice . . . that I am recommending the habit of asking a question about . . . a cherished belief.'[7]

But as she must know, this is precisely the area that is the most difficult for a beginner to do work in, and there is one obvious problem here around which it is almost impossible to get: how can a comparatively uninformed person (and presumably she wants to reach individuals from a wide variety of groups) distinguish between a mere cherished belief and something that, however mistakenly, the person regards as a fact? There is a human tendency to try to support long-held beliefs. One of the strengths of Stebbing's work is that she wants to proceed along the lines of daily thought – the kind of thinking that one might engage in while reading the newspaper, driving, or holding



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a conversation with a workmate or fellow passenger. But the difficulty is that it is in those very situations that our cherished beliefs often get trotted out as facts, and very frequently without our being aware of it. Sometimes those beliefs involve persons from other groups – without knowing it, we may hold discriminatory beliefs against others, but believe them to be tested fact. Other sorts of considerations involve simple errors; we may confidently tell a friend that it is possible to drive to a nearby large city in about an hour when it is actually more like two. Those sorts of errors we can put down to misremembering or even miscommunication. Still other cherished notions often masquerading as facts might involve, for example, alleged or purported pieces of information about geography or even basic science. The question then is: how does the thinker who wants to move along the lines that Stebbing proposes make the beginning moves?

Stebbing begins to answer these questions when she recommends, epistemically, a move that might be thought to belong more to ethics: she asks the reader to inquire into whether or not what he or she holds as a questioning move for the other person is one that he or she is willing to make personally. (The answer, as she indicates, is that we are often unaware of what we are doing conceptually, and when it is brought to our attention, we are unable to do that which is required.) Thinking in terms of 'you and I: I and you', as Stebbing proposes, goes a long way, or so she argues, to dispelling some of the problems that plague the instantiation of critical thinking.[8]

It could be argued that Stebbing oversimplifies the situation, and that the statistics of the sorts of incidents she recounts – failure to see that the type of error we attribute to the other person is also attributable to us – indicate that there is often not much room for growth. Nevertheless, the argument that Stebbing makes is strong in terms of its import: picking out informal fallacies committed by others should help us pick them out when we commit them ourselves. As she notes, 'I remember some of the bad

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blunders I have myself made and I realize that my readers, or hearers, may well reply "Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones." '[9]

To try to flesh out Stebbing's point here – and to try to make her argument as plausible as possible – what she is asking is that, in a political discussion, for example, when I accuse my opponent of circularity or some other argumentative defect, I ask myself if I am guilty of the same thing. Given a desire to engage in clear thinking (and given that I am conscious of this desire), it may well be possible for me to come to some conclusions about whether I am so guilty, and if so, resolve to change my behaviour. What happens all too frequently, of course, is that I do not recognize circularity in my own arguments, while I attribute them to others. Nevertheless, and even though the reader is tempted to say that Stebbing is being a bit unrealistic here, her advice is well-taken, and, in any case, following through on that advice depends, as she herself admits, on motivation. Thus Stebbing spends a great deal of time in the first chapters of her short work on that very difficult area – acknowledging our own flaws as critical thinkers, while still trying to work and question within the framework of what we know.

## II

Thinking in terms of what we know is likely to produce not only a tendency to fail to see what amount to 'cherished beliefs', but is also likely to induce an abuse of language towards those who do not hold similar beliefs. This is a serious flaw in most argumentation, and again Stebbing is very aware of the fact that much of the language misuse that occurs in argument has to do with accusing our opponents of bias and so forth when, to repeat a point made earlier, we do the same thing ourselves. In other words, there are a number of ways of framing arguments to make it seem that a point made by one side is factual or at least is evidence of clear thinking,



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while a point made by the other side is erroneous, or the result of tendentiousness.

As an example of the sort of rhetoric with which she is concerned, Stebbing uses some material from elections of her day and, to her credit, she even finds material from *Punch* that illustrates her points. Again noting the human tendency to be unable to make sense of an opponent's position while still loudly touting one's own opinion, she quotes *Punch*'s advice on the 1935 General Election: your own side has a 'comprehensive programme of reform' while the other side has an 'unscrupulous electioneering manifesto'.[10] Part of the reason that she feels free to cite this material, presumably, is that our frailties in these directions are so well known to us – and a topic of so much commentary in the general culture – that almost any reader will recognize the accuracy of her assertions and most likely enjoy the humour.

If there is any difficulty here with Stebbing's argument – and this is a difficulty that may run throughout the work – it has to do with the fact that she seems to believe that it is comparatively easy to throw off the blinkers. It is particularly noteworthy that she repeats the necessity for doing this, as if it could be easily done, when she herself uses as examples a good deal of material that is either cultural in origin, or downright nationalist. One of the features of her work that makes it of remarkable historical interest in the present is the fact that, during this period immediately before the Second World War, Stebbing uses a number of examples of colonialism and colonial politics to make her point. The attachment of European nationals to their colonies is comparatively unexamined by her, and she no doubt had reason to fail to examine it. But even allowing for the views of the pre-war Europeans, part of what makes her argument a bit hard to take at full force is that the very attachment about which she writes would make any examination of political views on the part of a citizen that much more difficult.

In a well-known chapter of the book titled 'Potted Thinking', Stebbing provides examples of the sorts of phrases (all too

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common, as she admits) that she thinks we should avoid using. She writes:

> Cruder forms of potted thinking than those we have been considering are revealed in the use of such phrases as 'young Eaton Square Bolshies','Trotskyite wreckers', 'lily-livered pacifists', 'bloated capitalists', 'paunchy stockbrokers', and 'milk-sop Christians'. Such emotional language compresses into a phrase a personal reaction and an implicit judgment about a class of persons.[11]

But as Stebbing ought to know, the use of such rhetoric is not only common, but in many circumstances unavoidable. The use of it does not necessarily signal a lack of argument, or even a lack of thought. Indeed, the use of incendiary language (especially in political circles) may signal the beginning of an argument. Nevertheless, one has to commend Stebbing for at least trying to make the reader aware of such difficulties.

In her specific writings on propaganda, Stebbing again shows an awareness of the fact that propaganda is a form of argument – it is simply a very weak form of argument. She realizes that each of us is vulnerable to the many emotional shadings of pitches that are thrown at us, and because of the very factors that we have just mentioned (the ubiquity of the prompts and our tendency to go along with them, particularly when they play on our long-held beliefs) it is often very difficult for us to move forward argumentatively, or, as Stebbing has it, to think to some purpose.[12] What we have to do, then, is to raise our awareness of what it is that we are up against; in particular, we have to raise our consciousness about the false generalizations that we are likely to encounter, and the uses to which they are put. Advertising, one of her favourite examples, often uses the major generalizations that we encounter so frequently we fail to see through them – 'all', 'many', or 'most', of this or that believe the following. Stebbing has an excellent collection of such generalizations, and from the standpoint of historical analysis it is intriguing to



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see how many of these types of generalizations were in use quite some time ago.

In the middle of her chapter on propaganda, Stebbing offers the following:

> A patent medicine is offered as an infallible cure for a standard chest complaint. A promise is made that even the most obstinate cases will yield to this treatment. There follow 'letters of gratitude selected from hundreds.' A woman writes that she had despaired of ever being well, but now she is 'a different woman.' . . . [The reader] believes that he has been offered evidence that this medicine will enable him to achieve [health].[13]

This particular illustration nicely ties together two of the main concerns that Stebbing exhibits throughout her work – she notes that we have a desire to believe (this is obviously related to the 'cherished beliefs' category), and that it is very difficult for us to pull ourselves away from this desire. That desire, combined with the fact that we may be presented with 'evidence' pulled together by those who have a vested interest in benefiting from our desires, can yield obstinate false beliefs that very much get in the way of, as she has it, thinking 'to some purpose'. A further problem, as she also acknowledges, is that cultural traits may go a long way towards influencing the presentation of the alleged evidence, our response to it, and the context in which the evidence is presented. When all of these factors are taken into consideration, we can see why it is that the attempt to get our fellow citizens to think critically is often doomed to failure, and fraught with difficulties that are hard to articulate, and even harder still to eradicate.

## III

It is easy to remind ourselves that Stebbing's overall task in her work is to try to inculcate a sense of respect for

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rational thought so that, as she has it, we can make critical decisions as citizens of various societies. As we have seen, she is sensitive to the notion that we cannot always be as thoughtful, critical and rational as we would like to be – some of the time we are bound to fall back into our bad habits; indeed, the social milieu in which we function seems to encourage it.[14] How, then, can we encourage ourselves to try to do better, given that we must acknowledge that the 'facts' and 'information' surrounding us are not what they should be?

Part of what Stebbing is trying to inculcate for the readers of her work is a sort of self-awareness; we have to begin to catch ourselves as we process the information that is coming in, and two of the areas in which we need to do the most work are those having to do with taking in new material that conflicts with our previously known 'facts', and developing the capacity to use a critical eye to look at information, especially print information.[15] All of this, of course, is easier said than done. We can begin to read a newspaper with the best of intentions, and try to seek out any inconsistency between the principles of best reasoning and the information that we are receiving, but in many cases this does very little good. (It is all too easy to fall back into bad habits, or simply to forget what we are doing.) We can question ourselves about our long-held beliefs, but in many cases we lose the chain of questions, are distracted or simply do not know how to proceed.

Although Stebbing can be faulted in this regard (she is not nearly as clear about how one ought, realistically, to avoid 'potted thinking' as she might be), she does raise interesting issues with respect to this problem in the chapter titled 'Difficulties of an Audience'.[16] Stebbing does not herself articulate this as a tactic; the descriptions that she gives of speakers trying to reach differing audiences (the educational lecturer versus the politician, for example) can also be useful for potential hearers and readers. The point, in other words, is to try to place oneself in the position of someone who is performing either of these tasks as



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one actually takes in (especially in the case of reading) putative information. Stebbing indicates that the educator, while speaking, has as a primary goal not only the imparting of facts, but the inculcation of sound mental habits, the very habits that Stebbing herself hopes that her readers will pick up. In fact, she specifically says that part of the educator's task is to get the students to be able to 'seek knowledge and to acquire the ability to form their own independent judgment'.[17] If this is the role of a speaker in a certain sort of context (given a certain sort of audience, as Stebbing indicates), then perhaps one way for an individual to try to avoid the traps of repetitive, biased thinking to which we are all susceptible is to ask herself or himself whether or not what is being imparted is of a calibre sufficient to enable intellectual growth. Forcing oneself to ask this question on a regular basis (again, whether listening or reading) may have the beneficial side-effect of making the audience member much more aware of what is going on, including her or his habit to think in a biased manner. In other words, we can do a lot of work with what it is that Stebbing recommends when we make the move of using some of the advice that she gives and taking it as advice for the audience.

Probably the most difficult feature of such advice-using would be motivation – and, presumably, Stebbing knows this. As we read or listen (and reading has to be the more common act here, at least for most adults) our rush to finish and our tendency to try to keep the procedure as painless as possible militate against asking ourselves the sorts of difficult questions that Stebbing recommends. But one thing that we can do to increase our obviously small desire to engage in this task is to try to be on the lookout for any emotion-pushing material when we see it. In reading, for example, the daily newspaper will often present information in precisely the way that Stebbing characterizes as 'potted' – the purported information will often play on our fears, or repeat well-known cultural clichés that amount to the same sort of thing. Political figures from lands with

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which our nation has had a problematized past, or who have harangued against us or our allies in public, will almost never receive any sort of even moderately impartial write-up in a daily newspaper. To take an example from current events as perceived across the United States, the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez before his death had almost invariably been referred to as a 'dictator' or 'demagogue' in American papers (despite the fact that he was popularly elected), largely because he has made a number of remarks extremely critical of the United States and its foreign policy.[18] If we read these accounts quickly, much of what is going on will not attract our attention. But if we read in the manner of speaking that Stebbing recommends for speakers who actually want to educate, we will be much more likely to notice the various sorts of potted thinking and cliché-ridden examples of thought that are available to us daily.

As is the case with much of what Stebbing writes in *Thinking*, her advice is important, but asks us to engage in activities that may not come naturally to us, or that may require too much from us. The habit of failing to engage in critical reading – if it may be termed that – is one that far too many of us have because, in general, we often read for pleasure, not content, or where we believe that we are actually reading for content, we simply are not doing so. Most of these tendencies are related to potted thinking, as Stebbing would have it, because that type of thinking, again, requires comparatively little effort, and is not only something in which we naturally engage, but in which we have all too frequently seen others engage. In other words, what Stebbing recommends goes against the grain, not simply for individuals, but for entire cultures. In today's media-driven society, the force of this type of thinking is far greater than it was during her time, when the media, in developed nations, consisted largely of radio, newspapers and occasional parts of the cinema. Almost all contemporary commentators on the scene have noted that 'sound bites' are ubiquitous, and that the desire to obtain sound



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bites has a great deal to do with the level of reporting, at least on television and parts of the internet. This is potted thinking at its peak – the sound bite itself, and the motivation to select something as a 'bite', often reflects someone's preconceived notion of what should count as important, and is often so far from being appropriately contextualized as to be laughable.

Given all of the foregoing, we might well wonder whether the advice that Stebbing gives, based on experiences of some seventy or more years ago, is at all relevant to today. But it appears that it is. All we have to do to be able to benefit from Stebbing's advice is to make some appropriate adjustments, and we can then buttress the notion that her advice is indeed relevant and valuable.

## IV

Stebbing's work, which was published immediately before the Second World War, might not be worth reading today were it not the case that her work is an early version of efforts in critical thinking, which is now a burgeoning field. Stebbing was acutely aware, as has been indicated, of the fact that the public, in her time, was inundated with a range of material for which it, on the whole, was frequently unprepared. The human tendency to want to interpret new material in light of information or at least supposed information already absorbed in the past is one that is nearly ineradicable, and, as Stebbing knew, it requires real work to be able to move beyond that tendency. Because so many will need a good deal of prodding in order to begin the task, Stebbing was herself moved to try to provide some of that stimulus.

Part of her goal no doubt had to do with what she saw as the looming possibility of war, and her text throughout indicates that interest in foreign affairs prompted a great deal of her thought. If, as we have said, it is difficult but possible to try to eradicate some of one's own 'potted'

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habits by reading with an eye towards what a speaker might be intending, that particular exercise could not have been more important than it was at that time, with an influx of information regarding European powers, their place in the general political scheme, and Britain's response to it.

Throughout her work, Stebbing is cautious about what can be accomplished as we try to move past our bad intellectual habits, but some of the flavour of what she intends for her overall efforts is provided towards the end of her work. In her final chapter 'Democracy and Freedom of Mind', she writes:

> Some people have supposed that to be reasonable is incompatible with being enthusiastic. Personally I do not think so ... If 'enthusiasm' is taken to mean 'unreasoning passionate eagerness', then, no doubt, enthusiasm is incompatible with reasonableness. If, however, 'enthusiasm' means 'intense eagerness', I see no incompatibility. We can be enthusiastically *for* a cause *about* which we have reasoned dispassionately ...[19]

The sentiments expressed here may, indeed, be the driving force behind what Stebbing originally intended to write. In time of trial, it may be important to be able to feel a certain kind of enthusiasm, but – especially if war looms – that enthusiasm needs to be tempered by reason. Ultimately, the inculcation of a type of worthy emotional response pushed forward by reason may have been the goal of Stebbing's work, and it is noteworthy that this goal is one that we can identify with today.

Stebbing's work *Thinking to Some Purpose* is seldom alluded to now, even though many of the works in critical thinking that have come to the fore in the meantime are not as clearly written, and do not have as wide a range of pertinent examples. But if we can take even a small part of Stebbing's somewhat difficult advice – especially about developing the care to try to eradicate some of our own



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bad habits – it will be worth the effort to read her work. This early exercise in critical thinking does, indeed, serve some purpose.

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## Notes

[1] L. Susan Stebbing, *Thinking to Some Purpose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1941), 9. For comparison, it is interesting to cite such works as Albert Blumberg, *Logic: an Introduction* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1976).

[2] Ibid. 10–11.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. 18.

[5] Ibid. 22.

[6] The title of her third chapter, pp. 27–36, is 'The Mind in Blinkers'.

[7] Ibid. 31.

[8] Stebbing has a chapter with this title, and it is pp. 37–44 in the text.

[9] Ibid. 37.

[10] Ibid. 45. Stebbing claims that this is a direct quote from *Punch*, the satirical British publication. She does not provide a citation.

[11] Ibid. 58–9.

[12] Her Chapter VII, 'Propaganda: an Obstacle', is on pp. 62–73.

[13] Ibid. 64.

[14] See n. 10. In a somewhat humorous vein, Stebbing finds British publications particularly guilty of phrasing 'information' in such a way that it leads to poor thinking.

[15] An interesting thought experiment here has to do with asking ourselves what Stebbing would have thought of today's media, including the internet. It is probably not an overstatement to say that she would not have been terribly impressed.

[16] This particular chapter is Chapter VIII, pp. 73–80.

[17] Ibid. 74.



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[18] As this is written, Chavez died after a long struggle with cancer. In a number of venues, he continued to be referred to as a 'dictator', and his efforts at redistribution – popular in leftist circles – were derided in a number of places as having accomplished little.

[19] Ibid. 186–7. This chapter is on pp. 182–7.



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