



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
Paderborn University, Germany

Voluntarism in Susan Stebbing (1885–1943)

Andreas Vrahimis
University of Cyprus

In her earliest writings, Stebbing (1913, 1914) broadly defines “voluntarism” as the thesis that “will is more fundamental than intellect” (1914: 13), which can have psychological, metaphysical, and epistemological manifestations. Voluntarists tend to reject determinism in preference to “radical contingency” (4). They also criticise the intellect’s limited epistemic capacities, appealing instead to various non-intellectual methods for acquiring knowledge. Stebbing (1914: 130-131, 161-162) distinguishes three types of voluntarist methodologies: (i) appeals to intuition (e.g. within French “spiritualism”), (ii) appeals to extra-rational choice (e.g. Pascal’s wager, James’ “will to believe”, or Renouvier’s “moral method” (Stebbing 1914: 161)), and (iii) appeals to action (e.g. Séailles’ and Guyau’s “philosophie des idées-forces”).

In discussing voluntarism, Stebbing responds both to debates concerning the Pragmatist critique of “intellectualism” (Kremer 2017), and also to Bergson’s sudden rise to fame in the Anglophone world after his 1911 visits to England (Stebbing 1914; v; see Vrahimis 2022). In his Anglophone reception (e.g. James 1909; Russell 1912), Bergson was presented as the American Pragmatists’ “anti-intellectualist” ally. Stebbing (1914, 50-54) criticised the caricature of Bergson as an “anti-intellectualist”, a term which she finds “so ambiguous as to be practically useless as a label” (113)). She also argued that Bergson’s views clash with certain Pragmatist tenets, e.g. in the theory of truth (Stebbing 1913; 1914: 58-83). While conceding that both Bergson and the Pragmatists subscribe to forms of Voluntarism, Stebbing rightly argues that Bergson’s work should be understood within the specific context of the “spiritualist” strand of the French Voluntarist tradition. Anglophone scholarship only recently started to acknowledge what Stebbing demonstrated as early as 1912 (e.g. Sinclair 2015: 162; Dunham 2020: 268; Viola 2020; Watt 2021): that Bergson’s work is not, as James (1909) thought, the unprecedented product of a solitary creative genius, but rather a continuation of nineteenth-century French philosophy.

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