

## ON WHAT EMPIRICISM CANNOT BE

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**Abstract:** Bas C. van Fraassen, in his Terry Lectures at Yale University (subsequently published as *The Empirical Stance*), is concerned to elucidate what empiricism is, and could be, given past and current failures of characterization. He contends that naïve empiricism—the metaphilosophical position that characterizes empiricism in terms of a thesis—is self-refuting, and he offers a *reductio ad absurdum* to substantiate this claim. Moreover, in place of naïve empiricism, van Fraassen endorses stance empiricism: the metaphilosophical position that characterizes empiricism in terms of certain attitudes and commitments. The present article, however, argues that van Fraassen begs the question in his reductio of naïve empiricism, and thus that his primary defense of stance empiricism is inadequate.

Keywords: Bas C. van Fraassen, empiricism, empirical stance, metaphilosophy, naïve empiricism.

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Standard characterizations of empiricism identify the tradition by way of some statement or thesis (for example, “Experience is the one and only source of information” or “Experience provides the only solid foundation for substantive knowledge”). On this conception, call it “naïve empiricism,” someone is an empiricist just in case he or she believes the empiricist thesis (whatever it may be).

But there are alternatives to naïve empiricism. One alternative, call it “stance empiricism,” identifies empiricism with a certain set of attitudes or commitments aimed at generating factual beliefs. Unlike naïve empiricism, it is the attitudes or commitments and not the beliefs or theses that demarcate the empiricist tradition. Thus, on stance empiricism someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she embodies the empiricist stance: that is, if and only if he or she has the attitudes or commitments distinctive of empiricism. Empiricists may be prone to believe that (for example) experience is the one and only source of information and to disbelieve that (for example) universals exist, but they need not believe or disbelieve any specific set of claims in order to count as empiricists. A second alternative to naïve empiricism is “dogmatic empiricism.” This interpretation characterizes empiricism

according to a thesis *and* some set of attitudes or commitments. Thus, on dogmatic empiricism, someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she believes the empiricist thesis and embodies the empiricist stance. Dogmatic empiricism is a more recent suggestion, and although it is relevant, the debate has largely centered on the merits and demerits of naïve and stance empiricism.

These metaphilosophical issues largely reemerged as a result of Bas van Fraassen's Terry Lectures at Yale University, subsequently published as *The Empirical Stance* (van Fraassen 2002). In these lectures, van Fraassen is concerned to elucidate what empiricism is, and could be, given past and current failures of characterization (or instances of what he calls "false consciousness"): "What is empiricism, and what could it be? All the philosophers we count as empiricist rejected the positions of their predecessors, even while acknowledging them as their philosophical heroes. For each of them, the question what empiricism could be or could become was more important than regret over past failures. So it has been for me as well" (2002, xiii).

Van Fraassen claims that naïve empiricism is one such failure. On his understanding, empiricism "cannot consist in believing some statement about what the world is like" (2002, 46). That is, empiricism cannot be a thesis. (Van Fraassen at times refers to the corresponding thesis of a philosophical position as its corresponding "statement," "dogma," "doctrine," or "hypothesis." I shall limit myself to the term "thesis.") He identifies the problem by way of a *reductio ad absurdum*; naïve empiricism, when assumed (together with some additional premises), entails a contradiction. Indeed, this *reductio* constitutes one of van Fraassen's primary motivations for introducing and endorsing stance empiricism.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I argue that van Fraassen's *reductio* of naïve empiricism begs the question, insofar as it succeeds only given the prior assumption that empiricism is a stance. In so doing, I do not intend to offer naïve empiricism as a more plausible candidate than either stance or dogmatic empiricism; the latter two may, in the end, be better characterizations of the tradition. Rather, I intend only to challenge the force of van Fraassen's *reductio*.

## 1

Van Fraassen commences his critique of naïve empiricism with considerations of philosophical positions more generally. Traditionally,

<sup>1</sup> Van Fraassen's most rigorous presentation of the *reductio* occurs in the second section of the second lecture of *The Empirical Stance*, entitled "Critique: What Empiricism Cannot Be." The conclusion arrived at here is that empiricism cannot have the form of naïve empiricism. Then, in the third section of the second lecture, entitled "What Empiricism Could Be: Philosophical Stances," van Fraassen proffers his endorsement of stance empiricism in light of the foregoing.

philosophical positions (such as nominalism, realism, dualism, and so on) are characterized by way of some corresponding thesis. This suggests the following general principle (which van Fraassen dubs “Principle Zero”):

- (1) For each philosophical position  $X$ , there exists a statement  $X+$  such that to have (or take) position  $X$  is to believe (or decide to believe) that  $X+$ .

Principle Zero and the innocuous

- (2) Empiricism is a philosophical position

entail that

- (3) There exists a statement  $E+$ , such that to have (or take) the empiricist position is to believe (or decide to believe) that  $E+$ .

Thus naïve empiricism follows naturally from Principle Zero.

And yet, naïve empiricism is not committed to Principle Zero. The naïve empiricist could claim that empiricism is defined by way of some corresponding thesis and yet deny that every philosophical position is defined by way of some corresponding thesis. This amounts to a rejection of Principle Zero insofar as Principle Zero is a claim about every philosophical position. As such, Principle Zero, while it may constitute strong motivation for endorsing naïve empiricism, is not a necessary component of the *reductio*.

Moreover, following van Fraassen, I shall denote the empiricist thesis by “ $E+$ .” It makes no difference what this statement consists in, whether it be “Experience is the one and only source of information,” or “Experience provides the only solid foundation for substantive knowledge,” or “There are no innate ideas,” and so forth, so long as it accounts for the distinctive characteristics of the empiricist tradition. I shall thereby take (3), not Principle Zero, as the assumed premise of van Fraassen’s *reductio*.

## 2

I turn now to the *reductio* itself. I begin by enumerating those premises that are explicitly identified by van Fraassen (and some more besides). I shall consider what logically follows from these premises in section 4. Van Fraassen himself identifies the following characteristics as central to naïve empiricism:  $E+$  must be a factual thesis, it must denounce metaphysical practice, and it must not itself be vulnerable to empiricist critique (2002, 42). I shall briefly consider each of these in turn.

The empiricist thesis must be a factual thesis. What is intended by “factual” here? The closest van Fraassen comes to a definition is when he remarks: “Clearly, E+ cannot be a tautology, so it must be a factual thesis” (2002, 42). But of course this statement (most charitably read) suggests only that being tautological is a sufficient, not a necessary, condition of being a nonfactual thesis. And this seems correct, for, plausibly, any statement that expresses a logical contradiction is itself a nonfactual statement. “It is not the case that Lincoln was assassinated and not assassinated” and “Lincoln was assassinated and not assassinated” both seem to count as nonfactual statements (the former constituting a tautology and the latter a contradiction). I shall leave it as an open question whether or not so-called broadly logical contradictions or necessities, like “The bottle is all green and all red,” are best rendered as factual or nonfactual. Accordingly, we may say that E+ is a factual thesis if and only if it is not strictly tautological and not strictly logically contradictory. Hence, claims like “There are three polar bears in my backyard,” “Universals exist,” and “Electrons have negative charge” are all factual claims.

It is in this sense that van Fraassen asserts that

(4) E+ is a factual thesis.

Van Fraassen also hints that, since E+ is a factual thesis, it can only be known a posteriori, and thus that E+ must also be contingent. For instance, van Fraassen observes that empiricists often assert that “no factual claim is a priori,” and later that “E+ is a factual thesis, a statement that is contingently true or false” (2002, 42–43). Again, I take these claims to be open questions. It is worth observing, however, that Saul Kripke (1980) and Hilary Putnam (1977) contend that there are identity statements that are necessarily a posteriori; and if this is correct, then not all factual statements would be contingently true. For certainly the identity claim that “Hesperus is Phosphorus” constitutes a factual claim. Moreover, if the contingent a priori is a legitimate category, as Kripke supposes, then some factual statements are capable of being known a priori. It may be that van Fraassen is apt to dismiss these contentions as instances paradigmatic of the metaphysics that empiricists reject.

Of particular interest, then, is van Fraassen’s second characterization: namely, empiricism’s rejection of metaphysics. In this respect, van Fraassen (2002, 37) contends that E+ must involve:

- (a) A rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points,  
and
- (b) exhibit a strong dissatisfaction with explanations by postulate.

To illustrate, take a standard metaphysical concern: the problem of universals. Metaphysicians typically motivate this problem by drawing

attention to phenomena of predication, property agreement, abstract reference, and so on. Said phenomena are claimed to be in need of explanation, and metaphysicians frequently posit unobservable entities to serve as the needed *explanantia*. Thus a metaphysician may ask, “What explains property agreement?” And another might answer by appealing to unobservable entities, for example, universals. Metaphysics, then, demands explanations at certain crucial points and often provides explanations by positing unobservable entities or forces (such as universals, substances, laws of nature, and so forth). Van Fraassen claims that empiricism is fundamentally opposed to this way of doing philosophy.

He introduces a further, more positive aspect of empiricism (2002, 43):

(c) Disagreement with any admissible factual thesis is admissible.

The motivation for (c) stems from a certain respect for the natural sciences. Given that science is fundamentally concerned with factual, and thus contingent, claims (on van Fraassen’s interpretation), it cannot antecedently rule out any particular factual claim within its domain of study. Thus, van Fraassen writes: “In science disagreement is not impiety, and doubt is not treason, no matter what the content. That feature is very salient in the empiricist case for taking empirical science as our paradigm of rational inquiry” (2002, 43). In short, since (c) seems true of scientific practice, empiricists strive to render it true of philosophic practice. Accordingly, (a) to (c) jointly constitute the empiricist’s rejection of metaphysics.

One last (explicitly provided) element of the *reductio* remains. Van Fraassen’s third characterization of empiricism, that E+ must not itself be vulnerable to empiricist critique, involves what he calls the “Corollary to (NE)” (where “NE” stands for “naïve empiricism”). It reads:

(5) For all  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  is an empiricist critique of  $y$  if and only if  $x$  is a demonstration that  $y$  is incompatible with (contrary to) the empiricist dogma E+.<sup>2</sup>

Consider all of those claims that are commonly thought to be inconsistent with empiricism—for example, “Experience does not provide the only solid foundation for substantive knowledge” and “There are

<sup>2</sup> I have slightly modified van Fraassen’s presentation of this premise. I see no reason to think that this modification is in any way unfair or problematic. Van Fraassen’s formulation reads: “Empiricist critique of X = demonstration that X is incompatible with (contrary to) the empiricist dogma E+” (2002, 43).

innate ideas.” Let “E−” stand for any one of these non-empiricist claims. Since E+ and E− are contradictories or contraries, it is true that

- (6) E− is in disagreement with E+.

(Indeed, I take the “is in disagreement” locution, as applied to statements, to just mean that they are contradictory or inconsistent. As will become apparent, van Fraassen needs this premise in order to run his *reductio*. I say more about this locution in the next paragraph.) Ostensibly, then, there exists some empiricist critique of E−. Accordingly, any purported critique that demonstrates that E− is incompatible with E+ would count as an empiricist critique of E−.

But we need to spell out the meaning of “incompatible” and “demonstration” more fully. The incompatibility or disagreement described in (5) and (6) is best construed as logical incompatibility, such that  $p$  is logically incompatible with  $q$  if and only if  $p$  entails  $\sim q$ .<sup>3</sup> (And, of course,  $p$  entails  $\sim q$  if and only if  $q$  entails  $\sim p$ .) Accordingly, an empiricist critique of E− would demonstrate that E+ entails  $\sim E$ − or that E− entails  $\sim E$ +. Insofar as we understand “incompatible” to mean logical incompatibility, we can understand the meaning of “demonstration” along the lines of a logical proof. Van Fraassen does not spell out the meaning of these terms (or the locution, “is in disagreement,” that is explicit in [c]), but it is natural to interpret his terminology in this way.

Anja Jauernig, however, has identified a potential problem for this conception. Jauernig emphasizes two kinds of metaphysical claims, what she calls “metaphysical-epistemological” claims, like “Humans have the capacity to acquire substantive a priori knowledge,” and “metaphysical-ontological” claims, like “Universals exist.” She observes that, while there is a logical incompatibility between the empiricist thesis and metaphysical claims of the first kind (the epistemological variety), there does not appear to be a corresponding incompatibility between the empiricist thesis and metaphysical claims of the second variety (Jauernig 2007, 275). This is problematic insofar as the empiricist no longer has any available empiricist critique of metaphysical-ontological claims. Whether or not Jauernig is correct in her criticism will depend a great deal on what “E+” in fact stipulates, and I am not altogether convinced that a demonstration of the incompatibility of E+ with metaphysical claims of the second variety (metaphysical-ontological claims) is impossible. Even if this is not quite correct, and van Fraassen wishes to understand “incompatibility” and “demonstration”

<sup>3</sup> This is the characterization given by Anja Jauernig (2007).

in some other sense, any such interpretation would not impact the criticism that follows.

Suppose, then, that we substitute  $E+$  into (5).  $E+$  would factor into an empiricist critique of  $E+$  just in case there is some demonstration that  $E+$  is incompatible with or contrary to itself. But, since  $E+$  is obviously consistent with  $E+$  (they are, after all, the same statement),  $E+$  does not factor into a critique of itself. Van Fraassen concludes from this that

(7)  $E+$  is an admissible thesis.

Put differently,  $E+$  is invulnerable to empiricist critique.<sup>4</sup> This is because an empiricist critique of  $y$  is nothing more than a demonstration of the logical incompatibility of the empiricist thesis with  $y$ , and since  $E+$  is obviously compatible with itself, it is not vulnerable to any such demonstration. Moreover, the conjunction of (4) and (7) entails

(8)  $E+$  is an admissible factual thesis.

Note, however, that while van Fraassen (2002, 46) does not explicitly mention (7), he clearly asserts (8). And it is natural to interpret him as arriving at (8) via the conjunction of (4) and (7).

(3), (5), (6), (8), and (c) constitute the premises of van Fraassen's reductio. Van Fraassen contends that a contradiction logically follows from these premises: namely, that  $E-$  is both admissible *and* inadmissible. As van Fraassen (2002, 46) puts it, naïve empiricism either has no bite (that is, it cannot adequately decry metaphysics) or it bites its own tail (that is, it is self-refuting). Given this contradiction, he rejects naïve empiricism: empiricists are not to be identified by way of some empiricist thesis  $E+$ . In section 4, I consider whether or not van Fraassen's reductio succeeds; I contend that it does not. Before I do so, however, it may be helpful to say a bit more about the nature of stance empiricism.

### 3

Stance empiricism stipulates that someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she embodies the empiricist stance. But what is a stance? And what

<sup>4</sup> Van Fraassen frequently describes the empiricist thesis as "invulnerable" to empiricist critique. He writes, "If we were to advance some candidate for the role of  $E+$ , it would have to furnish the basis for the critique that the empiricist rebels aimed at their targets in metaphysics. But what would it take for  $E+$  to furnish such a basis? It would itself need to be invulnerable to that critique (that is, be the sort of thing which that critique leaves standing). At the same time it would have to imply the falsity, untenability, or meaninglessness of all metaphysics" (2002, 43).

renders some stance an empiricist stance? Van Fraassen is notoriously brief in his exposition of this notion. He writes: “A philosophical position can consist in a stance (attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such—possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well). Such a stance can of course be expressed, and may involve or presuppose some beliefs as well, but cannot be simply equated with having beliefs or making assertions about what there is” (2002, 48).<sup>5</sup> Stances are fundamentally noncognitive. A stance consists of at least one element—such as a particular attitude, commitment, approach, value, and so forth—that is incapable of being true or false.<sup>6</sup> (Hereafter, and for the sake of simplicity, I shall speak only of attitudes and commitments.) We can always cognitively say something about stances—and thus say something that is either true or false—but stances themselves always lack a truth-value.

Consider pacifism when characterized as a stance. On stance pacifism, someone is a pacifist if and only if he or she embodies the pacifist stance: that is, if and only if he or she has the attitudes and commitments distinctive of pacifism. Suppose that this stance consists in someone’s strongly disliking or disapproving of violence and war and is at bottom committed to their dissolution. The attitudes or commitments that constitute this particular stance do not make any assertions or claims about the way the world is, they are simply dispositional traits or tendencies directed at a given (or a set of given) practices—in this case, violence and war. Since no assertion is made, the pacifist’s attitude or commitment is not capable of being true or false, and thus is noncognitive. But this does not prevent us from cognitively talking about stances. Asserting that (for example) “pacifism is a stance” makes a claim that is either true or false, and thus we can cognitively talk about stances despite the observation that stances are in themselves noncognitive.

Although stances necessarily contain a noncognitive component, they may and often are expressed (whether internally or externally) in terms of beliefs. Take again the stance pacifist. Suppose that she is a woman who believes that (for example) violence and war are always wrong (call this statement “*A*”). This does say something about the way the world is, and therefore possesses a truth-value. But believing that *A*, or any other proposition or thesis, is not a necessary condition for someone’s being a pacifist

<sup>5</sup> Van Fraassen has subsequently expounded on the nature of a “stance.” See Van Fraassen 2004b.

<sup>6</sup> Stances consist of at least one noncognitive element, but they may contain more (as van Fraassen’s phrase “a cluster of such” indicates). In addition, stances that contain more than one noncognitive element may do so either disjunctively or conjunctively: for instance, some stance  $v$  may consist of attitude  $\alpha$  or commitment  $\beta$ , whereas a distinct stance  $v^*$  may consist of attitude  $\alpha$  and commitment  $\beta$ , where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  remain constant for both  $v$  and  $v^*$ . On a disjunctive construal it is possible that, for any two individuals, they may both endorse  $v$  and yet fail to share any of their attitudes or commitments.



(at least not according to stance pacifism). She is not a pacifist because she believes this or any other claim; she is a pacifist because of the nature of her attitudes and commitments. So stances may be and often are expressed in terms of beliefs, and often it is these beliefs that help us determine the specific stances people endorse. Accordingly, value judgments like *A* constitute cognitive ways of communicating stances to others, but they do not in themselves constitute definitions of those stances. We could also characterize these utterances noncognitively, such that the pacifist's utterance that (for example) violence and war are always wrong is semantically equivalent to "violence and war, ugh!" Thus when it comes to the communication and expression of stances, cognitive and noncognitive roads are open to the stance pacifist. And of course the same holds for the stance empiricist (or, for that matter, any stance). Stance empiricism also consists of a particular "attitude, commitment, approach, or cluster of such"; in this case, the attitudes and commitments are aimed at metaphysical practice. This may involve beliefs and may be expressed either cognitively or noncognitively, but empiricism is not to be equated with any of these beliefs. This involves a crucial departure from naïve empiricism: whereas naïve empiricism characterizes empiricism cognitively, by way of the empiricist thesis E+, stance empiricism does so noncognitively.

A stance may also presuppose beliefs. The key here is to recognize that, by way of an example, our stance pacifist need not presuppose any particular belief in order to count as a pacifist; she needs only to believe something relevant to the subject matter in order to be a pacifist. The intuition is that someone can have (for example) a commitment to the dissolution of violence and war only if he or she has some beliefs about violence and war, and so forth. This may be as straightforward as having beliefs about what counts as an example of an act of violence or an act of war, or paradigms of nonviolent resistance. But, again, pacifism should not be identified with any one (or any conjunction or disjunction) of these beliefs. Someone who possesses all of these relevant beliefs and yet lacks the appropriate attitudes or commitments would not count as a pacifist on stance pacifism. Similarly, it may be a necessary condition on stance empiricism that empiricists presuppose certain beliefs (for instance about what may legitimately count as "experience" or "metaphysics"), but empiricism is not to be defined by way of any one of these beliefs.

Anjan Chakravartty (2007) observes that stances are aimed at generating factual beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Stances could, however, merely be aimed at

<sup>7</sup> Chakravartty writes: "A stance is a cluster of commitments and strategies for generating factual beliefs. It makes no claim about reality, at least not directly. . . . Rather, one commits to a stance, or adopts it—they are possible means to realms of possible facts. Crucially, holding a stance is a function of one's *values* as opposed to one's factual beliefs, and though values may be well- or ill-advised, they are not true or false" (2007, 187). I shall omit the "discount competing stances" qualification in what follows.

discounting competing stances (or perhaps they may have no general aim at all). The attitudes and commitments of the stance pacifist either render the beliefs of those less critical of violence and war inadmissible or, at the very least, if they are admissible, they are antecedently regarded as false solely on account of their being inconsistent with the pacifist's stance. This is why van Fraassen continually reiterates and emphasizes that a crucial value of empiricism is its "recurrent rebellion against metaphysics" (2004a, 127). He observes that, for the empiricist, this rebellion essentially involves a dissatisfaction with explanations by postulate, even if called for (2003, 128). I take this latter qualification—"even if called for"—to suggest that there may be good cognitive or rational reasons for introducing an explanation by postulate, and yet the stance empiricist nonetheless rejects it (and this because his or her attitudes or commitments render explanations by postulate inadmissible or false). Stances as such are filtering systems, and anything that is opposed to the attitudes or commitments that make up the stance is deemed either inadmissible or false. I am inclined to think that van Fraassen would prefer the term "inadmissible" to "false," but the latter remains a possibility.<sup>8</sup> That he favors the former is suggested by his characterization of (c):

(c) Disagreement with any admissible factual thesis is admissible.

The sense of admissibility connoted here involves the permissibility of a thesis (or, more accurately, the admissibility of *disagreement* among theses): the thesis or disagreement is allowed and is not antecedently barred from consideration or appraisal.

An ambiguity persists, however, in van Fraassen's use of the terms "admissible" and "inadmissible," an ambiguity again identified by Jauernig. The sense of admissibility that factors into the consequent of (c) connotes (as was just mentioned) the idea that the disagreement is permitted, allowed, and not antecedently barred from consideration or appraisal. We can call this sense of admissibility "admissible<sub>1</sub>." But the sense of admissibility derived from (5) and captured in (7) appears to be distinct from that of admissible<sub>1</sub>. Something is admissible<sub>2</sub> if and only if it is not incompatible with the empiricist thesis E+. This begins to look like a problem for van Fraassen. As Jauernig argues, there is no contradiction in claiming that E- is admissible<sub>1</sub> and inadmissible<sub>2</sub>. Something can be both permissible and logically inconsistent with the empiricist thesis. Thus van Fraassen appears to be guilty of

<sup>8</sup> Peter Lipton (2004) and Paul Teller (2004) independently characterize stances as "epistemic policies." The attributes they identify blend nicely with my exposition above. Van Fraassen has commented that the notion of an epistemic policy "provides valuable insight into the concept [of a 'stance']" (2004, 174).

equivocation. There is, however, a plausible escape for van Fraassen at this point: namely, that inadmissible<sub>2</sub> entails inadmissible<sub>1</sub>. If  $y$  is incompatible with  $E+$  and thus inadmissible<sub>2</sub>, then, if inadmissible<sub>2</sub> entails inadmissible<sub>1</sub> for the empiricist,  $y$  is also inadmissible<sub>1</sub>. But, since (c) entails (when conjoined with the additional premises discussed below) that  $E-$  is admissible<sub>1</sub>, we can arrive at the desired contradiction:  $E-$  is admissible<sub>1</sub> and inadmissible<sub>1</sub>. This may or may not succeed, but the entailment between inadmissible<sub>2</sub> and inadmissible<sub>1</sub> is a plausible one on stance empiricism. My point for mentioning it is that, even if it does manage to avoid Jauernig's objection, van Fraassen still faces a problem.

Accordingly, we may characterize stance empiricism as stipulating the following: Someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she possesses the attitudes or commitments that generate that kind of belief that characterizes factual, metaphysical claims as inadmissible or false. If this is what stance empiricism consists in (and I contend that it does), then van Fraassen has a problem when presenting his *reductio*. I shall now turn to this problem.

#### 4

As noted above, van Fraassen contends that the conjunction of (3), (5), (6), (8), and (c) jointly entails a contradiction: namely, that  $E-$  is admissible and inadmissible. In other words, the conjunction of naïve empiricism and a number of central premises characterizing that position entails that any and all metaphysical claims are both admissible and inadmissible for the empiricist.

Now we have the resources for a *reductio ad absurdum* argument: Contraries of  $E+$  are not compatible with  $E+$ , yet must be admitted!

On one hand, (c) tells us that contraries of  $E+$  must be admissible by the empiricist. This is simply because  $E+$  is a factual thesis, a statement that is contingently true or false, so disagreement with it is admissible. On the other, the status of  $E+$  as empiricist dogma guarantees that its contraries are not admissible—that is the corollary to (NE). (van Fraassen 2002, 43)

The first conjunct of the intended contradiction is easy to derive. As van Fraassen's comments in the quotation above make explicit, the first conjunct ultimately stems from the empiricist's commitment to (c). From (c), (6), and (8), it follows that

(9) (6) is admissible.

But, plausibly, if disagreement between  $E-$  and  $E+$  is admissible for the empiricist, then  $E-$  itself is admissible for the empiricist. That is to

say, if disagreement between the contentions (for example) “There are innate ideas” and “Experience is the one and only source of information” is permitted or admissible for the empiricist, then certainly the contention “There are innate ideas” is permitted or admissible for the empiricist. Van Fraassen does not identify this premise, but he needs it in order to derive the first conjunct of the intended contradiction. Thus,

- (10) For all  $x$  and  $y$ , if disagreement between  $x$  and  $y$  is admissible and either of  $x$  or  $y$  are themselves admissible, then both  $x$  and  $y$  are admissible.

(8), (9), and (10) entail that

- (11)  $E^-$  is admissible.

Therefore, metaphysical claims like  $E^-$  are admissible on naïve empiricism. (11) constitutes the first conjunct of the intended contradiction.

What about the second conjunct, that  $E^-$  is inadmissible? “ $E^-$  is inadmissible” does not obviously follow from (3), (5), (6), (8), and (c). Accordingly, there must be some implicit premises at work in van Fraassen’s *reductio*. Observe that, in the quotation above, van Fraassen connects the notion of “inadmissibility” to the corollary to (NE); in our terminology, he connects this notion to (5). There he says, “[T]he status of  $E^+$  as empiricist dogma guarantees that its contraries are not admissible—that is the corollary to (NE).” But the connection between inadmissibility and (5)—that is, the corollary to (NE)—is not explicitly presented in any of the premises above. Thus, in order to derive the second conjunct of the intended contradiction and given his statements in the above quotation, van Fraassen seems to be assuming the following premise:

- (12) For all  $x$  and  $y$ , if there is some  $x$  that demonstrates that  $y$  is incompatible with (contrary to) the empiricist dogma  $E^+$ , then  $y$  is inadmissible for those who believe  $E^+$ .

Moreover, (5) and (12) enable us to derive

- (13) For all  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x$  is an empiricist critique of  $y$ , then  $y$  is inadmissible for the empiricist.

The idea appears to be that since  $E^-$  is any metaphysical claim and as such is in disagreement with the empiricist thesis  $E^+$ , there is some empiricist critique of  $E^-$ . (This follows from [5].) And since we are now able to derive (13) given the introduction of (12), the fact that

there is some empiricist critique of  $E^-$  entails that  $E^-$  is inadmissible. Only with this premise or something similar to it—that is, (12)—can van Fraassen complete his reductio.

I contend, however, that any defense of (12) begs the question against the naïve empiricist. Why should we believe that the relevant demonstration of incompatibility—that is, the antecedent of (12)—renders some claim inadmissible? Or, to put it in terms of (13), why should we regard an empiricist critique as necessarily consisting of a charge of inadmissibility? Recall that we previously characterized stance empiricism as stipulating that someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she possesses the attitudes or commitments that generate that kind of belief that characterizes factual, metaphysical claims as inadmissible or false. I contend that the only plausible reason for van Fraassen's implicit endorsement of (12) is his antecedently characterizing the empiricist's rejection of or dissatisfaction with metaphysics—as captured in (a) and (b)—as a *dispositional* unwillingness to engage in metaphysical practice. But such characterizations are true of stance empiricism, not naïve empiricism. (13)—the claim that an empiricist critique has as a necessary condition a charge of inadmissibility—makes perfect sense when we understand empiricism in terms of stance empiricism; but, an empiricist critique of some metaphysical claim is not necessarily inadmissible on naïve empiricism (indeed, the very nature of naïve empiricism suggests the opposite). Moreover, changing the term “inadmissible” in (12) to “false,” while enough to save van Fraassen from begging the question against the naïve empiricist, will not do. This modification is insufficient, for the intended contradiction will no longer follow. One would simply derive the conclusion that “ $E^-$  is admissible and false,” which is not a contradiction.

We can illustrate this more fully. Perhaps empiricists reject metaphysical practice (both by rejecting the need for explanations at certain crucial points and by rejecting the practice of providing explanations by postulate) in thinking that the conclusions of metaphysics are false, but not because of some previous disposition (that is, attitudes or commitments) to take the metaphysician's methods and postulates less seriously. Simply demonstrating that  $E^-$  is incompatible with the empiricist thesis  $E^+$  does not entail that  $E^-$  is inadmissible from the perspective of  $E^+$ . The example from Wesley Salmon that van Fraassen (2002, 44) mentions is useful at this point. Salmon contends that, from the perspective of science, scientology is an admissible factual hypothesis and yet it is considered to be (from the perspective of science) false or probably false. It is admissible because it is a factual claim, and, given (c), science must admit the possibility of its truth. Initially characterizing the claims of scientology as inadmissible would be too dogmatic for science. In addition, scientology is considered false or probably false from the perspective of scientific knowledge because

(presumably) our scientific knowledge is incompatible with such contentions. Likewise, we may say, from the perspective of the empiricist thesis  $E+$ ,  $E-$  is admissible but false (or probably false).<sup>9</sup> To suggest otherwise—that is, to endorse the above premise—is to antecedently portray empiricism as a stance. Thus, van Fraassen begs the question against the naïve empiricist, for the *reductio* succeeds only given the prior assumption that empiricism is a stance.

Of course naïve empiricism may fail for other reasons. The charge of self-refutation, at least to the extent that  $E+$  cannot itself be substantiated by experience in the way that  $E+$  specifies, or the charge that in assenting to  $E+$  empiricists are engaged in the sort of metaphysics they so adamantly reject, is an objection that has often been aimed at the tradition.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, van Fraassen also associates himself with this form of criticism, noting: “This is modern empiricism’s second, and I think much more serious, disaster” (van Fraassen 2002, 46). Irrespective of whether or not these more standard objections constitute fatal objections to naïve empiricism, I hope to have shown that naïve empiricism does not succumb to van Fraassen’s initial criticism—the *reductio* here explicated.

## 5

Thus far I have limited my attention solely to that of naïve and stance empiricism. But dogmatic empiricism is also relevant to this discussion. In the introduction I defined dogmatic empiricism as the view that someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she believes the empiricist thesis and embodies the empiricist stance. Jauernig (2007, 289) introduces the name “dogmatic empiricism” in the course of offering a new form of naïve empiricism, one that purportedly avoids van Fraassen’s *reductio*. In contrast to my characterization of dogmatic empiricism as distinct from naïve and stance empiricism, however, Jauernig conceives of her position as a form of naïve empiricism.

Jauernig’s strategy is to modify (c). She ultimately settles on the following:

(c\*\*) Any hypothesis that can in principle be empirically investigated, or that is logically entailed by  $E+$ , is admissible, and

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Stephen P. Schwartz argues for this very conception in his “A Defense of ‘Naïve’ Empiricism: It Is Neither Self-Refuting Nor Dogmatic” (unpublished).

<sup>10</sup> F. H. Bradley (1893) is a standard example. More paradoxically, Bertrand Russell makes this charge: “I will observe, however, that empiricism, as a theory of knowledge, is self-refuting. For, however it may be formulated, it must involve some general proposition about the dependence of knowledge upon experience; and that any such proposition, if true, must have as a consequence that itself cannot be known. While, therefore, empiricism may be true, it cannot, if true, be known to be so” (1940, 207).

only hypotheses that can in principle be empirically investigated, or that are logically entailed by E+, are admissible.

This successfully restricts the number of theses that are deemed admissible. Since metaphysical claims cannot in principle be empirically investigated (we may accept this for the sake of argument), they are not rendered admissible. Jauernig's amendment of (c) to (c\*\*) prevents the admissibility of E−, and thus prevents any entailment to the first conjunct of the contradiction.

Making use of Jauernig's position, I wish to make three observations. First, the centrality of Jauernig's place for "admissibility" suggests a strong noncognitive element in her account. Indeed, it would seem that hypotheses (or, in my terminology, "theses") that are in principle capable of empirical investigation are admissible because the empiricist is committed to them or because the empiricist embodies a negative attitude toward those hypotheses that are not in principle capable of empirical investigation. This seems sufficient to place Jauernig's position well within the confines of stance empiricism, if it were not for her additional emphasis of the empiricist thesis E+. The empiricist thesis also plays a fundamental role, and thus Jauernig seems to be blending the characteristics of both naïve and stance empiricism. Accordingly, Jauernig appears to be inattentive to the stance empiricist component of her position, and her commitment to preserving some kind of empiricist thesis leads her to label her position as a form of naïve empiricism. And yet, to be an empiricist on Jauernig's interpretation is *both* to believe the empiricist thesis *and* to render hypotheses that are not in principle capable of empirical investigation inadmissible. This is a third kind of metaphilosophical characterization of empiricism, in addition to naïve and stance empiricism. This is my reason for labeling this third category "dogmatic empiricism."

Second, van Fraassen's reductio of naïve empiricism would in fact be better suited for a criticism of dogmatic empiricism. Since dogmatic empiricism necessarily contains both cognitive and noncognitive elements—that is, an empiricist thesis and an empiricist stance—van Fraassen's reductio would not beg the question against dogmatic empiricism. This is not to say that the reductio would not fail for other reasons; indeed, it may fail on account of the modifications introduced by Jauernig. Either way, the reductio would not affect naïve empiricism.

Third, and what is most important, these considerations indicate a potential objection that may be leveled at the criticism I have provided above. Does not all of this suggest that every philosophical position is in some sense a stance? After all, as I noted above, even the scientist considers the claims of scientology *admissible*, though perhaps false or probably false. And, as I have characterized the position, the naïve empiricist considers the claims of metaphysics admissible, though false

or probably false. In short, every inquirer approaches any subject matter by demarcating a sample space (to use a mathematical expression) of what is admissible in contrast to what is inadmissible. (We may simply label the space of all admissible theses for any given subject his or her “space of admissibility.”)<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even in those cases where everything is admissible and nothing is antecedently deemed inadmissible, the notion of admissibility nevertheless arises, and the subject has a space of admissibility (in this case it just happens to contain all theses). Thus to some extent everyone—including the naïve empiricist—seems to embody some stance.

In fact, these observations seem correct, but the conclusion that everyone embodies some stance does not exonerate van Fraassen with respect to his characterizing naïve empiricism in the particular way that he does—that is, in terms of the particular stance of “stance empiricism.” Certainly, I cannot (consciously) accept a claim as true that is (consciously) inadmissible by my standards. While we may say, however, that in this broad sense of the term everyone has a stance, this can be distinguished from stance empiricism proper.

The reason is straightforward enough. Stance empiricism defines the philosophical position of “empiricism” by way of reference to what an individual regards as admissible and inadmissible. On this account someone is an empiricist *because* he or she renders claims of type  $x$  inadmissible. Identifying type  $x$  (namely, metaphysical claims) as inadmissible significantly narrows the space of admissibility. Thus, for instance, someone who endorses E+ and finds the proposition “Universals exist” admissible is not an empiricist on stance empiricism, despite the fact that he or she endorses some claims as admissible or inadmissible (that is, despite the fact that to some extent he or she endorses a stance). And this is because the relevant attitudes or commitments are not about the right sort of claims, or, more to the point, the individual does not adopt the right sort of attitude or commitments with respect to those claims. For it is a necessary condition on stance empiricism that the empiricist has attitudes or commitments about the inadmissibility of metaphysical practice. And to characterize naïve empiricism in this way is to beg the question. Thus the observation that every philosophical position is to some extent a stance does not dispense with my criticism, for the problem is engendered by the

<sup>11</sup> The expression “sample space” is taken from probability theory. The probability of some favored outcome is measured against the sample space—or the totality of relevant possibilities. For example, the tossing of a single six-sided die has the standard sample space of  $S = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}$ . Observe, however, that  $\{7\}$  is not a member of  $S$ . Thus  $S$  demarcates all of the possible outcomes of an experiment (and thereby all of the impossible ones). Indeed, some of these outcomes may even be improbable—e.g.,  $P(1) = 1/6$ . Accordingly, in speaking of a “space of admissibility” I analogously intend a set of all of those propositions that a subject admits as admissible (even if unlikely).



*particular* stance that van Fraassen identifies (namely, that stance which renders metaphysical practice inadmissible) when characterizing naïve empiricism.

## 6

I have observed that naïve empiricism stipulates that someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she believes the empiricist thesis (whatever it may be), and that stance empiricism stipulates that someone is an empiricist if and only if he or she embodies the empiricist stance: that is, has the attitudes and commitments distinctive of empiricism. I have argued that van Fraassen, in order to derive the second conjunct of the intended contradiction, assumes a premise that antecedently portrays the empiricist as adopting the empiricist stance. This, however, begs the question against the naïve empiricist.

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