

Review: Discussion: What Is a Stance?

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DISCUSSION – WHAT IS A STANCE?*

Van Fraassen is extremely brief in how he characterizes his notion of a stance:

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 (48).

With a view towards expanding and in some respects modifying this characterization I will proceed by looking at the arguments to see what kind of a position they support.

1. THE ARGUMENT IN CHAPTER 2

Van Fraassen characterizes the “received view” of what it is to hold a philosophical position as

Principle Zero: For each philosophical position X there exists a statement $X+$ [the dogma or doctrine of X] such that to have (or take) position X is to believe (or decide to believe) that $X+$ (41).

The doctrine characteristic of empiricism is labeled “ $E+$ ”:

A candidate for $E+$ could be something like ‘Experience is the one and only source of [factual or contingent] information.’ Its exact content does not matter to our current argument, as long as it purports to be a factual thesis (43).¹

van Fraassen argues that empiricism cannot be consistently so characterized.

Here’s my version of the argument: We have not said exactly what $E+$ is: “Experience is the only source of contingent information” serves as a rough guide that could be refined in many ways. It is required only that $E+$ says or implies that



experience is the only source of contingent information, that E+ itself cannot be supported by appeal to experience, and that E+ is itself contingent. All of these are very plausible conditions for a wide range of candidates for E+. But if all these conditions obtain, it seems plain that any effort to maintain E+ would be self-defeating.

Here is a slightly different way to present the issue: van Fraassen takes a central characteristic of empiricism to be that it embodies a “radical critique of metaphysics” (42). And van Fraassen interprets this as requiring that E+, whatever it is in detail, “...would have to imply the falsity, untenability or meaninglessness of all metaphysics” (42). Let us say, to have a term that we will want to refine, that E+ implies the *rejection* of metaphysics. But E+, as a factual thesis that goes beyond anything supportable by experience, itself counts as a bit of metaphysics! So it would seem that E+ implies its own rejection.

Here is what van Fraassen takes this kind of argument to show:

If the empiricists' position consists, in accordance with Principle Zero, in the assertion or belief of a factual thesis, then they have no way to demur from the very sort of metaphysics they typically attack ... [So] [t]here cannot be such a proposition as E+. There is no factual thesis itself invulnerable to empiricist critique and simultaneously the basis for the empiricist critique of metaphysics. So either empiricism reduces to absurdity or ... Principle Zero is violated, ... and a philosophical position need not consist in holding a dogma or doctrine (46).

I submit that what the argument supports is a weaker conclusion: not that there can be no such proposition E+ to function in Principle Zero, but rather that there can be no such proposition that is held or maintained in a certain way, held as a “thesis” in a technical sense that I will specify. If this is right then what follows is that either empiricism is not a position that works with a doctrine such as E+, or it is a position that does advocate an E+, but not as a “thesis”.

In reference to the first formulation of the argument, we are assuming that E+ says or implies that experience is the only source of support for contingent information and that E+ itself

is contingent but cannot be so supported. All that follows is that E^+ cannot be supported. But this is consistent with saying either that there is no E^+ , regarded as dogma or doctrine of empiricism, or with saying that to be an empiricist is to believe such an E^+ but, if we are reflective and honest, with no pretensions to thinking that this belief is rationally mandated. The first alternative seems clearly to be the one van Fraassen has in mind – do not treat E^+ as a belief but as characterizing an attitude or commitment or approach – as a summary statement of a guideline or policy for what is to be regarded as well supported. But the argument is consistent with the second alternative, and so, if the argument functions as a guide to understanding what is meant by a “stance”, the second alternative should not be neglected.

How the issue plays out with the second formulation of the argument turns on our understanding of “rejection”.

On a first reading one might say: If Q is some metaphysical principle or proposition, to say that E^+ implies the rejection of Q is understood to mean that the truth of Q is incompatible with E^+ , requiring that, if E^+ is true, Q is false, or truth valueless, or nonsense (45). On this reading, since E^+ itself is a value of Q , an instance of a metaphysical thesis, E^+ does indeed undermine itself, and one must conclude that empiricism cannot be understood as advancing any such E^+ as explicit dogma or doctrine. But as a second reading we could say that for E^+ to imply the rejection of Q is for E^+ to imply that Q cannot be rationally mandated. Then indeed, E^+ applied to itself shows that E^+ cannot be rationally mandated. But not that it cannot be believed.

I will mention a variant of the second reading because I suspect that it gets at the heart of van Fraassen’s dissatisfaction with “metaphysics”. Understand “rejection” so that to reject Q is not to conclude that it is false, or truthvalueless, or meaningless but that it is not be accorded the same epistemic status as known empirical facts or facts supportable from known empirical facts. Again what follows is that, if to be an empiricist is to believe some such E^+ , it will be an E^+ not to be accorded the same epistemic status as what is empirically grounded.

2. THE IDEA OF AN EXPLICIT STANCE

We have seen that there need be no incoherence or similar reflexivity problem with “Experience is the source of all contingent information” by itself. But you are in trouble if you add that “Experience is the source of all contingent information” is itself contingent, is a piece of information, that this information cannot have its source in experience, and that to count as “information” a statement needs a “source”, that is some basis for belief. This immediately gives an alternative way of expressing the weaker conclusion of the argument: If the other premises are maintained, what follows is that “Experience is the source of all contingent information” is not itself a piece of information. But that could be because the statement should not be regarded as the object of belief at all, or because the belief in question is held without the sort of grounding that makes the epithet “information” appropriate.

To spell this out I will introduce a specialized reading of the word “thesis”: I will say that someone believes a statement as a thesis if they also believe, or expect, or even just hope that, in the context under consideration, the statement is susceptible to rational support of the kind that makes it uniquely defensible as opposed to its contraries. The “susceptible to rational support” may be only “in principle”, may be hopelessly out of practical reach. One can believe something but not in any such frame of mind, and so not as a thesis in this technical sense. For example, gamblers can fervently believe that their lucky number is about to come up. (Note also that such a gambler’s belief would hardly count as “information”.)

In the special case of empiricism the problem need not be, as van Fraassen concludes, that “[t]here cannot be such a proposition as E+”; the problem can be that one advances an E+ as a thesis. van Fraassen’s slighting of the option of belief, but not as a thesis, may be that he doubts that this is the interesting case. This is connected with his contrast between belief and acceptance² and is well illustrated with his extended examination of materialism: A clear thesis would require saying what counts as “material” or “physical”, but since this requirement

can not be met we make much better sense of the tradition of materialism by understanding it as an attitude, a guideline, an approach, a commitment to connecting our accounts of phenomena with the understanding presented by our current physics.

The option of “believe but not as a thesis” may have little application, but nonetheless the condition, “not as a thesis”, proves useful in spelling out the notion of a stance. What is at issue is the traditional view that our epistemic guides should be formulated as theses, in the specialized sense I described. We retain the idea of having epistemic guides – we could hardly do otherwise and remain deliberative agents. But we reject holding these as theses³. So a stance, more specifically an epistemic stance, is an epistemic guide believed or advanced in some other manner, but not as a thesis. The question then is – if not as a thesis, then what? I urge that it is a mistake to look for any closed form, any exactly stated and universally applicable answer to this question.

I suggest that the idea of a stance should be taken to be an open-ended notion, and insofar as it is positively characterized, characterized functionally. We need guidelines for ways to form and evaluate beliefs. An epistemic stance is such a guideline. To characterize an epistemic stance as an epistemic guide is to characterize it functionally, in terms of what it does. It makes no more sense to try to say both exactly and generally what things will count as an epistemic stance than it would be to say exactly what physical objects will count as chairs or valve lifters. Of course, given the functional characterization of chairs or valve lifters and the facts of physics we can say a lot of relevant things, such as that a chair or valve lifter can not be made out of very soft material.

What then, positively, can be said about an epistemic stance? Another general theme that van Fraassen pursues at length, but that I can not examine in any detail here, is that to operate as an epistemic guide, but not as a thesis, a stance will be a matter of personal decision and commitment, if only by default by being presumed by the traditions of one’s community. In particular, when it comes to critical examination, a stance will have

more in common with debate over values than we had supposed. There is, of course, a great, great deal more that can – and I hope will – be said, especially by approaching the topic through careful examination of specific cases. But do not expect there to be some completely determinate and static theory of what a stance is. Functionally characterized, it can be expected itself to be a notion that evolves to meet our evolving needs and situation in the world.

So far the notion of a stance, whether a belief or some other sort of attitude or commitment (a belief is itself, after all, a kind of commitment) has been something that we think of as explicitly formulated, what I will call an explicit stance. Chapter 4, as I will interpret it, introduces a complementary notion of an implicit stance.

3. THE ARGUMENT OF CHAPTER 4

Suppose one has a “canon” for dealing with some subject matter, comprising a body of explicit statements describing what are taken to be facts, correct principles, procedures, and the like. There are three problems in using such a canon: identifying what belongs to the canon – there is room for doubt about what are the canon’s authentic elements; interpreting the canon’s explicit statements – there is always room for alternative interpretations; and applying the canon – how does the canon get applied to new cases. (If the canon includes explicit rules for application to new cases there will always be the possible issue of alternative interpretations of such rules, in which case the third problem may be seen as a special case of the second.) As an example bearing on empiricism van Fraassen cites Newton’s fourth rule of reasoning:

“In experimental philosophy we are to look upon propositions collected by general induction from phenomena as accurately or very nearly true, notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses that may be imagined, until such time as other phenomena occur by which they may either be made more accurate, or liable to exception.”... [But] [h]ow do we identify the phenomena? What do they mean (that is, how do we distinguish an accurate minimal description from one that amounts to a hypothesis by effectively adding an

interpretive element)? Finally, what is this general induction, i.e., what are the implications of the phenomena? (127)

To deal with such difficulties one could formulate rules for identifying authentic elements of the canon, rules for interpretation, and if they are not already included, rules for application. But, of course, the three problems will arise for the newly formulated rules. We are off on a regress. van Fraassen concludes from these considerations that there can be no firm and fixed epistemic foundations explicitly expressed as a text (132, 133).

Why do we not notice these problems in practice? Because we take ourselves to understand or to be able to recognize what belongs to our canon, how it is to be understood, and how it is to be applied. That is to say, a community has a “tradition”, a collection of interpretive practices as I will call them, that are used to apply the canon. We employ skills that we learn as part of our training in practical matters, including understanding the language in which the canon is expressed, but including a broad range of practices that a community passes on from generation to generation as intuitively practiced procedural knowledge. One can seek to express such procedural knowledge in explicit protocols, of course; but then the protocols themselves must be identified, interpreted, and applied. At any stage of our epistemic development we rely on some interpretive practices. In as much as these interpretive practices go unexpressed, the regress is stopped.⁴

This argument against epistemic foundationalism calls our attention to an inescapable role for taking what is in important respects very like a stance in the foregoing explicit sense. Our explicit pronouncements as to facts and procedure must be applied by use of an individual’s and a community’s collective interpretive practices. In the normal course of things these practices are learned and accepted without critical examination. Though for the most part these skills are exercised unreflectively, the fact that we reliably employ such practices shows that we are committed to them. Among these practices are many that function as epistemic guides, not held as theses (if only because they do not comprise explicit beliefs), and so constitute essential parts of our overall epistemic stance.

Insofar as such an aspect of our epistemic stance goes unexpressed, I will call it an implicit stance. While the argument and examples of Chapter 2 focused on philosophical doctrines as stances, the implicit commitments of our practical epistemic (and other) guiding practices go far beyond subjects about which we self-consciously philosophize.

4. STANCE AS POLICY

Talk of taking a stance is a metaphor. Earlier I cautioned against looking for any determinate and fixed “theory” of what constitutes a stance but suggested that there was a great deal more that could be illuminatingly said. I will illustrate the kind of thing I have in mind by briefly exploring what I think is an extremely closely related metaphor, that of adopting a policy. Here are some things that I take to be characteristic of adopting a policy:

1. To adopt a policy is to resolve or to commit oneself to acting or making decisions as described by the statement of the policy
2. A policy is not something that is true or false. Instead policies are evaluated as being well or ill advised, conducive to certain ends, easy or difficult to administer, and in many other practical respects.
3. Policies are generally not rigid in the sense that their recommendations may be overridden by other criteria or policies. For example, I might have a policy never to wear brown because I am slightly blue/green colorblind and so have difficulty judging which browns match. But I might override that policy if a friend, whose color judgment I trust, picks out brown clothing for me. Or, I might override the policy because I need unusually warm clothing and the only sufficiently warm jacket available happens to be brown. The first example illustrates how a policy can be overridden on the basis of facts not taken into account when it was formulated. The second example illustrates how a policy can be overridden as well because the values of which it is an expression

(wanting my clothing not to clash in colors) is in conflict with other values (wanting to stay warm).

4. Policies are always in need of interpretation and insofar are open-ended. For any policy there will be possible cases that might come up for which the statement of the policy will not make clear whether the case falls under the policy and possible cases for which it is not clear how the policy dictates that the case should be treated. When such a case comes up a decision is required about how to treat the case. For many such cases there will be other criteria in terms of which such decisions can be evaluated, but there will never be criteria set in advance which will govern evaluation of all such cases.
5. Policies are also open-ended in regard to the question of how they are applied, and in so far involve further respects of non-rigidity, interpretation, and judgment as discussed in 3, 4, and 6 below.
6. The process of interpretation required in administering a policy involves judgment. For example, I might have a policy not to lie. Most cases are clear-cut: I violate that policy if I tell you I mailed the letter you asked me to mail when I know that I did not. But have I lied if I tell you that I mailed it when, having forgotten, I hand delivered it instead? And what do I do if I am unsure whether it is cold enough to warrant wearing the possibly clashing warm jacket? In such cases we have to make a decision. The faculty of judgment on the basis of which we make such decisions in many situations and in many respects involves, at least in important respects, capacities better described in terms of non-cognitive skills rather than capacities to reason.
7. Policies are, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, expressions or implementations of values. To adopt the policy of not lying is an explicit expression of values. To adopt the policy of washing my dishes immediately after dinner every night might reflect the value of not wanting my home to get too messy, together with the factual knowledge of myself that without the discipline of a regular schedule the dirty dishes will pile up.

8. Policies also function to streamline the decision making process in ways called for because of practical, human limitations. For example, trainers of seeing-eye dogs might have the policy only to use Labrador Retrievers. Labs are known to provide very good seeing eye dogs and are readily available, while (let us suppose) resources are not available to make judgments on a case-by-case basis or to make close comparisons with other breeds. Note that in opting to let a policy cover for more exact factual information values are again playing a role. In this case there is a combined value and factual judgment that the cost of closer examination of candidate dogs for training is not worth the expected gains.
9. One may argue for or against policies. It does not follow from the fact that policies are things to which we commit ourselves, and so a matter reflecting choice and values, that we cannot argue for or against policies. However, such arguments cannot appeal only to matters of fact. Since to adopt a policy involves implementation of values, an argument for or against a policy must turn, at least in part, on prior commitment to values as well as on claimed matters of fact. In particular, an argument for or against a policy will often appeal to some other more general policy. For example, I might argue for a policy of non-discrimination in hiring on the basis of a more general policy of treating people equitably, in turn argued for (justified, we often say) on the basis of the policy of treating people as ends, never merely as means.

Taking an explicit stance is very like adopting an explicitly stated policy. In addition, it is easy to see our interpretive practices as rather like tacit policy. It is a good question why van Fraassen chose the term “stance” rather than “policy”. Perhaps “stance” better than “policy” connotes implicit as well as explicit modes; and perhaps ‘stance’ better foregrounds the essential role of values, to which fact, van Fraassen is eager to show, we have paid far too little attention. As the foregoing discussion of policies makes clear, this kind of idea involves an intimate interplay between (what are regarded as) facts and

values. Indeed, the interplay may be intimate enough to blur the distinction, a distinction that conversely, when taken to be sharp, may function only as an idealization. van Fraassen's treatment provides a wealth of further considerations that work to bring such interplay to light.

Comparison with the idea of a policy also provides one avenue by which to approach two large issues that I can only, as van Fraassen himself does (see pp. 61–62, 107–108, 133, 142–143) acknowledge: Doesn't the conclusion that our epistemic guides are stances and not theses immediately imply some kind of relativism? In so far as the basis of some discussion is taken to be a matter of stance rather than thesis, how are we to understand the nature of reasonable debate? Many will see in these issue implications of van Fraassen's position that are so disastrous as to warrant rejecting it out of hand. But he has offered us arguments that, I believe, we cannot afford to ignore. And far from thinking that these problems are hopeless, I believe that facing them will inspire us to engage in a rich and fruitful rethinking of the nature of the whole philosophical enterprise.

NOTES

* My thinking for this paper has been helped immeasurably by discussion of *The Empirical Stance* with Gaby Nevitt, Karen Neander, Pekka Vayrynen, Jim Griesemer, and Kevin Hoover; and by comments from Anja Jauernig.

¹ I will work with van Fraassen's term, "information", in this context taken to involve belief, thus a narrower notion than one encompassing, e.g., the information in a DNA sequence. Information in this sense requires that the belief in question has some reliability conferring justification, source, or basis.

² Space does not permit following this up. For the contrast see Teller (2001, pp. 126–127) and references therein.

³ A more detailed exposition might qualify this as "reject holding these as fundamental theses", allowing that given a "local foundation", the basis on which we work and argue in the present context, an epistemic guide, argued on the basis of the local foundation, can count as a thesis, in a notion of thesis relativized to the local foundation.

⁴ This paragraph summarizes some of the material in pp. 125–143.

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