

The Spirit of Empiricism? An Analysis of Empiricism as a Stance.

by

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B.A., Thompson Rivers University, 2011

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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In *The Empirical Stance* Bas van Fraassen sets out to uncover the spirit of empiricism: “what is empiricism, and what it could be, if it is to be a viable philosophy today?” (2002, p. 31). In answer to this question van Fraassen rejects the canonical characterization of empiricism as a philosophical position established on a thesis (such as *all knowledge comes from sense experience*), and argues that we must endorse empiricism as a philosophical position established in a *stance*. But what the empirical stance is or entails exactly, van Fraassen has failed to make clear. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and philosophically evaluate empiricism *as a stance*. In light of my analysis, however, I will argue that van Fraassen has not provided a concrete characterization of stance empiricism (or indeed stances in general), and that the concept remains problematically vague.

In Chapter, 1 I begin with a review and analysis of *The Empirical Stance*. I discuss van Fraassen’s arguments against the canonical characterization of empiricism, as well as the initial sketch of what stance empiricism is or entails provided by van Fraassen. Furthermore, I offer what I see as the clearest characterization of stance empiricism that can be seen from the initial sketch van Fraassen has provided: that the empirical stance is an epistemic strategy, with a commitment to empirical inquiry. In Chapter 2, I refute a prominent critique which has been made against van Fraassen’s ‘stance-ism’ – that stances are problematically relative. This critique is particularly problematic for stance empiricism as it compromises two of van Fraassen’s proposed *characteristics of empiricism*. In the remaining chapters I argue that stance empiricism is a problematically vague concept. In Chapter 3, I argue that it is not entirely clear what role experience, and the empirical, is to play in the *empirical* stance. In Chapter 4, I discuss two characterizations of stances which are similar to that which I draw at the end

of Chapter 1. I go on to argue that in light of van Fraassen's response to such characterizations we can see that they are inadequate in being able to fully encapsulate the concept of a stance. In Chapter 5, I conclude by arguing that for stance empiricism (and indeed any stance) to be a coherent position it must be limited to something in terms of being definable by some necessary beliefs. Furthermore, I offer a potential objection to my thesis – that for van Fraassen vagueness is a nonissue; I rebut this objection by arguing that even by van Fraassen's own lights stances *are* problematically vague.

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Chapter 1. Soul Searching. Empiricism, and What It Could Be.

Empiricism has a long history in Western Philosophy, and the mantle of empiricism has been assumed or placed upon many philosophers with varying philosophical views. Empiricism is classically contrasted with the philosophical position of rationalism which identifies *reason* as the primary philosophical standard or touchstone for attaining knowledge; in contrast for empiricists it is *experience*, rather than reason, that has held this role as the standard or touchstone for attaining knowledge. Moreover, in more recent decades empiricism has been contrasted with pragmatism, which identifies successful epistemic practice as our philosophical guide and standard. Empiricism has generally been seen as a philosophical position in ill repute since its popular decline in the late 1960's. In contemporary philosophy Bas C. van Fraassen is perhaps the most prominent philosopher donning the mantle of empiricism today, and throughout his career he has produced a number of works, most notably *The Scientific Image*, which defend empiricism as an epistemology and as a philosophy of science in particular. In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen has undertaken the task of uncovering the spirit of empiricism: "what is empiricism, and what it could be, if it is to be a viable philosophy today?" (2002, p. 31). In finding the solution to this problem, however, van Fraassen has recast empiricism and has broken the mold of what we traditionally hold empiricism to be. In van Fraassen's new empiricism he has maintained the classical rejection of speculative metaphysics and the postulation of entities or aspects of the world *a priori* (a method embraced by rationalists). However, as we shall see, van Fraassen's new meta-

epistemology includes at its core pragmatic elements which, at the level of philosophical positions, has reduced the opposition between empiricism and pragmatism.

In the canon of the Western Philosophical tradition, empiricism is classically characterized as a philosophical position which subscribes to a substantive factual thesis, or dogma: “We have no source of knowledge in S or for the concepts we use in S other than sense experience”¹ (where S stands for some subject area or field of knowledge). Contrary to this classic characterization of empiricism, van Fraassen argues that empiricism is not a position defined by a factual thesis; rather, he argues, empiricism should be more properly conceived of as a *stance*. However, what exactly the empirical stance is van Fraassen has failed to make explicitly clear.

This chapter will be devoted to explaining, and trying to further clarify stance empiricism. In the first section of the chapter I will discuss van Fraassen’s three arguments for rejecting the way we commonly view empiricism, and his reasoning for endorsing empiricism as a stance. Van Fraassen’s initial characterization of what a stance is or entails, and what specifically the empirical stance is or entails is rather inexplicit, and the concept remains vague and ambiguous, if not all together perplexing. In analyzing *The Empirical Stance* I have found three layers which make up what I refer to as van Fraassen’s “stance-ism”: from the bottom up there is *the empirical stance*, there are *stances*, and there is *epistemic voluntarism* which is the meta-stance. Epistemic voluntarism is proposed as a new way to view our epistemic lives and the role that our epistemologies are to play. In Section 2 I will go on to try and more clearly characterize

¹ Markie, Peter, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>>.

stance empiricism by looking at how stances can be seen to fit into van Fraassen's meta-philosophical voluntarist epistemology.

1.1 Three Arguments Against the Canonical Characterization of Empiricism.

Van Fraassen offers three arguments in support of viewing empiricism as a stance rather than a philosophical position adhering to a factual thesis. The first argument looks at the history of philosophy and shows that the characterization of empiricism in the canon is misconceived given that there is *no* cohesive thesis which unites all empiricists. The second argument shows the failure of empiricism when taken as a foundational empiricist thesis. Empiricism taken as a foundational thesis fails on two accounts: a) it runs into the problem of a vicious circle, or b) if this circle is reconciled a regress. The third argument asserts that *any* sort of empiricist thesis will ultimately result in an internally incoherent position. In light of these three criticisms van Fraassen asserts that empiricism is not, and cannot be a philosophical position consisting in a factual thesis and that empiricism as a philosophical position can, instead, consist in a *stance*.

1.1.1 That Empiricism Is Not a Factual Thesis: Looking at the History of Empiricism.

When we look at the history of philosophy we can see many philosophers with different philosophies that are nevertheless considered to be empiricists. Van Fraassen lists a number of "empiricist" philosophers who, and "empiricist" schools of philosophy which, throughout history endorse different views, theories and philosophical projects. There are of course most saliently the British empiricists – Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Mill. But there are also others who are considered to take part in the "tradition of empiricism." Just preceding Bacon would be the fourteenth century Nominalists, and

to a lesser extent in ancient philosophy we could even include Aristotle. Proceeding into the 20th Century we see the tradition of Logical Positivism (van Fraassen 2002, p. 32). Looking at this list we see a wide range of philosophers with different philosophical projects, but what is it that unites them as empiricists partaking in the same tradition?

Van Fraassen begins his discussion of the history of empiricism, by looking at the history of the term. Here we already run into a problem of mischaracterization, as many of the most prominent empiricists, the British empiricists, would not have considered themselves empiricists in their day, and many explicitly denied that they were empiricists (van Fraassen 2002, p. 32). The word has its origin in scientific methodology, where it was originally the title of a school of physicians called “empirici” who based their medical practice on observation and experience, rather than theory (van Fraassen 2002, p. 32). Here we can see that the term is not unrelated to the contemporary understanding. The term, “empiricist,” sees further usage by Bacon and Leibniz, where it is treated with some derision as a practice of naïve induction involved in Natural Philosophy or what we may refer to now as *science* (van Fraassen 2002, p. 33). Bacon criticizes empiricists as being “like ants, [who] merely collect and use” (qtd. Van Fraassen 2002, p. 33). Leibniz similarly criticizes empiricism as being an act of inquiry below the level of true science. He compares empirics to beasts who infer that “what happened once will happen again,” and that this is why it is so easy for beasts to be caught and similarly why it is “so easy for simple empirics to make mistakes” (qtd. Van Fraassen 2002, p. 33). Mill also strives to distance himself from being characterized as an empiricist. He treats empiricism with a disdain similar to that of Bacon and Leibniz maintaining, that it is a poor methodology of naïve induction (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 33, 208). Given the conception of “empiricism”

in the modern period, we can see that the text book classification of the British Empiricists in the Modern Period is clearly established in hindsight, since many of those who we consider the most prominent empiricists would not have characterized *themselves* as such.

So where do we get the canonical characterization espoused today? Van Fraassen asserts that the textbook classification of empiricism emerges in the 19th Century from historians of philosophy attempting to write a history of modern philosophical thought. This so called textbook history of Modern Philosophy concludes with Kant as the great victor of the Modern era, who is supposed to have created the synthesis which overcame the rationalist thesis and empiricist antithesis of early modern philosophy (van Fraassen 2002, p. 34). Within *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant draws the line between what will later be seen as two of the major warring schools in philosophy: Empiricism and Rationalism. Van Fraassen draws attention to two sections of the *Critique*, the first is *The Antimony of Pure Reason*, and the second is the final chapter *The History of Pure Reason*. In the former we see two perennial philosophies, Dogmatism and Empiricism, which each correspond respectively to the conflicting theses and antitheses (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 204-205). A more explicit division of the history of philosophy into what we now call Rationalism and Empiricism comes in *The History of Pure Reason*. Here Kant divides the history of philosophy by showing three of the most explicit changes in metaphysical theorizing. The second of these draws the outline for what will later become the “problem of knowledge” and the controversy over the origin of knowledge in Epistemology. This issue is the “origin of the pure cognitions of reason, whether they are derived from experience or... have their source in reason” (Kant, p. 703). Aristotle is held as the head

of the empiricists advocating for the origin of our knowledge in experience, whereas Plato is seen as advocating that the origin of our knowledge is through reason. Kant then asserts that Locke follows in the Empiricist tradition of Aristotle, by holding that the source of knowledge is experience; and Leibniz follows in the Rationalist tradition of Plato holding that the source of knowledge is the mind itself (Kant, p. 703). The 19th Century historians of philosophy identified a metaphor from Leibniz's *Essays* responding to the philosophy of John Locke as the most salient issue with which to articulate Kant's great divide – blocks of veined marble vs. blank slates – the principle of division being: whether our minds are created furnished with innate ideas, or created without them.

Controversy over innate ideas and the origin of knowledge became, and is still considered by many, as the defining difference between the schools of Empiricism and Rationalism. This criterion became codified in the canon of Western Philosophy and the defining feature of empiricism became its dogmatic adherence to a defining foundational thesis that innate ideas do not exist, and its lemma that knowledge originates in experience. This characterization is exactly the same as the one we find today in the canon of Western Philosophy, where we divide philosophy into two camps divided on the issue of our origin of knowledge: Continental Rationalists and British Empiricists. Van Fraassen argues that this characterization of empiricism, however, is naïve and inadequate, because as early as the late 19th Century we see within Continental philosophy the emergence of a new empiricist movement – positivism (2002, p. 35). This problem with the canonical characterization of empiricism emerges when it is brought to attention that positivists do not even engage in the innate ideas controversy, as their philosophical project concerns other matters altogether. The important issues of

positivism have to do with scientific methodology, and therefore positivists are not engaging in epistemological questions related to our psychology, which had previously been the primary issue for empiricists in the Modern Period. The epistemic analysis of method would remain as the defining project of empiricism even following the decline of positivism in the 20th Century. Given this shift in the respective projects of those philosophers we see as empiricists, van Fraassen asserts that we can see the inadequacy of the canonical characterization of empiricism. As he points out, if we look at the history of philosophy, the philosophical project of “empiricists” is recast in each generation of philosophical thinking.

Looking at the history of philosophy we cannot but agree that the canonical characterization of empiricism as a factual thesis is not an adequate representation of empiricism. The characterization is inadequate because there simply is not any substantive thesis which unites those we see as empiricists throughout the History of Philosophy. What we see are different empiricist philosophers with different philosophical projects. Aristotle is an inspiration of Locke’s Philosophy; however, Locke is working in a post-Cartesian Philosophical world view. Unlike Aristotle, Locke is working in a context of *the theory of ideas*, and is trying to work from inside our ideas to provide a foundation for knowledge. So, the epistemic projects of Aristotle and Locke are not similar enough to permit us to argue that they advocate a similar thesis, because they are working in different conceptual frameworks. Much in the same way, the positivists are working in the wake of the Kantian revolution, and so are not engaging in a project of psychological inquiry into knowledge, but instead engaging in a project of enquiry into methodology. Given that empiricism is recast in each generation, as a tradition it escapes

a specific doctrinal characterization. So, we can see that there is no unifying thesis, or dogma, which unites all empiricists, as empiricists were involved in a variety of different philosophical projects.

1.1.2 Rebellion: The Attitude of Empiricism?

In looking at the history of philosophy we can see that Empiricism does not subscribe to a specific thesis; rather we see empiricism as a tradition that is recast in each generation.

Van Fraassen then asserts that the most salient thread that makes empiricists part of the same tradition is a recurrent rebellion against metaphysicians, and their respective practice of theorizing and systematizing (2002, p. 36). We can include Aristotle in the empiricist tradition because of his rebellion against a Platonic metaphysical system. We also see the British Empiricists in a rebellion against innate ideas and knowledge being attained merely through postulate. A major inspiration to the empiricist movement in the Modern Period (particularly to the philosophy of Hume) was Newton, and his *Method in Natural Philosophy*². Newton asserts that in the practice of *natural philosophy* (science) our reasoning should proceed by observation of phenomena, that we should inquire into the properties of things and establish those properties through experimentation (p. 5). Moreover, he rejects, as a legitimate form of inference, speculative theorizing, or *hypothesis*, which propose unobservable entities to explain observed phenomena (Newton, p. 6). Similarly we see the positivists in a rebellion against speculative theorizing in science that makes claims about aspects of the world which cannot be observed or experienced. Providing more detail of this revolutionary aspect of empiricism, Van Fraassen puts forward that the general targets of empiricist critique are

² Newton, Isaac. *Newton's Philosophy of Nature Selections From His Writings*. Ed. H.S. Thayer. New York: Hafner Press, 1953.

forms of metaphysics that a) give absolute primacy to demands for explanation and b) are satisfied with explanations-by-postulate, that is, explanations that postulate the reality of certain entities or aspects of the world not already evident in experience (2002, p. 37).

These two criticisms result in a rebellion against metaphysics and correspond to two integral characteristics of empiricism:

- a) A rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and
- b) A strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) that proceed by postulation. (van Fraassen 2002, p. 37).

The question then remains: is this recurrent rebellion against metaphysics all that there is to empiricism, or is there not some sort of positive philosophical thesis being attained over and above the “rebellious” empiricist critiques? Prima facie the answer to this question would be that there is a positive project of empiricism, and that this ongoing revolutionary project is exemplified in the factual empiricist thesis that all knowledge comes from experience. Van Fraassen, however, will go on to criticize this canonical characterization of empiricism, and he will argue that if empiricism is tied to a factual thesis it is doomed to failure.

1.1.3 What Empiricism Cannot Be: The Failure of Empiricism as a Factual Thesis.

The canon of western philosophy characterizes empiricism as a philosophical position which adheres to a thesis. This thesis is generally conceived of as corresponding to an epistemic theory where experience is the foundation for knowledge. Van Fraassen addresses two points which demonstrate the failure of empiricism when taken as a thesis. The first argument shows that accepting experience as the foundation for knowledge leads to a theory which is ultimately untenable as it results in either a vicious circle or a

regress. The second argument asserts that if we accept empiricism as a thesis, foundational or otherwise, it results in an incoherent philosophical position.

Van Fraassen explains that a philosophical position is generally understood as being established on a “belief of what we and the world are like” (2002, p. 47), which may or may not be established on a postulated thesis or doctrine. To have or advocate a philosophical position as being established on a thesis is to be committed to certain beliefs. This last claim is referred to as Principle Zero:

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+. (van Fraassen 2002, p. 41).

X+ can then be considered the doctrine or dogma of position X. As an example van Fraassen uses mind-body dualism as position X, and the corresponding belief that the mind and body are real and distinct substances as the dogma of X+. If we take Principle Zero as the claim that there are specific beliefs corresponding to philosophical positions, and that to hold the beliefs are to have the corresponding positions, then there must be a corresponding principle for empiricism where the “dogma” of empiricism will be endorsed. This principle is defined as Naïve Empiricism (NE): To be an empiricist is to believe that E+ (the empiricist dogma). The dogma or doctrine of empiricism is commonly characterized as such slogans like: “experience is the one and only source of information” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 43). Van Fraassen argues that Naïve Empiricism is ultimately untenable, so we must violate Principle Zero and realize that a philosophical position can consist in more than a belief in what the world is like – it can consist in a stance (2002, p. 47).

Van Fraassen's first argument for the failure of empiricism taken as a philosophical position established in a thesis, is that as a foundational thesis empiricism is self-defeating. The argument van Fraassen presents he attributes to Hans Reichenbach, who he will take as a representative of logical positivism and what the positivists saw as the main problem with Modern Empiricism (2002, p. 39). The empiricist project of establishing a foundational thesis he argues, however briefly, cannot sustain itself and will result in either a vicious circle or a regress. The aim of foundational empiricism in the Modern Period was to provide a theory about what there is or how the world is like, and to demonstrate the correctness of this theory. For the Modern Empiricists this theory argued that "all legitimate concepts were to be reducible to those applicable in sense experience, and all knowledge was to be derivable from the facts known by experience" (van Fraassen 2002, p. 39). This, self-sustaining empiricist foundationalism, van Fraassen asserts, is bound to fail. It seems that the problem with the aforementioned thesis is that it contains concepts that cannot be reduced to those applicable in sense experience, and claims knowledge that cannot be derived from sense experience.³ He goes on to assert that the problem here is that the demonstration of such a theory would have to rely on a basis as content-full as the theory we are demonstrating (van Fraassen 2002, p. 39), and we find ourselves in a vicious circle. Furthermore, van Fraassen points out, even if a foundation for knowledge could be established with a construction on that foundation which yielded truth we would then run into a problem of an infinite regress: where we

³ That this is what van Fraassen is trying to say is not all together clear in *The Empirical Stance*; however, in *The Scientific Image* he does explain that a problem with the positivists trying to reduce all theoretical terms into observational terms is that "all language is thoroughly theory infected" (1980, p. 14), and so we cannot disentangle theoretical terms from our observational vocabulary.

can call into doubt or question our current construction and the foundation it is built upon (2002, pp. 39-40).

Van Fraassen does not spend much time addressing the problem of a regress which threatens foundational empiricism; however, this problem has been addressed by others. Laurence Bonjour has argued that the problem with empirical knowledge acting as a foundation for belief is it leads to a regress which can only be stopped through an *ad-hoc* stipulation. This is because no empirical belief can be justified without reference to some other empirical belief, or cognition, which in turn would need to be justified (Bonjour, p. 119). Indeed, van Fraassen explains that we cannot “stonewall” by stipulating such claims as “the described foundation in experience is a source of truth with certainty” (2002, p. 40). Such attempts to stonewall by providing an *ad-hoc* stipulation are untenable for empiricism, as such a claim can only be established by postulate. In making such a claim Naïve Empiricism is then revealed to be an epistemological doctrine with metaphysical presuppositions, and will fall prey to its own criticisms against metaphysical postulations of aspects of reality not given in experience. So, the empiricist thesis results in a vicious circle, an infinite regress, or a metaphysical postulate, so in any case the foundational empiricist thesis becomes ultimately untenable.

Van Fraassen argues further that even if we are to try and establish an empiricist thesis which is non-foundational, we still run into problems. The second argument for the failure of empiricism taken as a philosophical position established on a thesis is that this empiricist thesis would ultimately be incoherent. This is because the two previously mentioned criticisms of metaphysics (the first and second *characteristics of empiricism*) would have to be derivable from this empiricist thesis; simultaneously, this thesis would

have to be itself immune to such criticisms. A further element that would be necessary for an empiricist thesis is that it must admit to a requirement of legitimate factual theses held in the sciences: that disagreement with any admissible hypothesis is admissible. The admissibility of disagreement in science corresponds to the empiricist rebellion against any factual claim being *a priori* (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 42-43), as this would require such a claim being established by postulate. So, to be not only in line with how we view respectable hypotheses in the sciences, empiricists must view theses as being contingent to avoid making *a priori* assertions about such theses. This leads to van Fraassen's *third characteristic of empiricism*:

- c) As in science, so in philosophy: disagreement with any admissible factual thesis is admissible. (van Fraassen 2002, p. 43).

This third *characteristic* reveals dire consequence for empiricism being taken as a philosophical position adhering to a thesis. The criticisms found in the first two *characteristics of empiricism* assert a rejection of philosophical positions with theses that proceed by postulate, but this leads to a contradiction with the third *characteristic of empiricism*. This contradiction emerges because an empiricist thesis must admit contrary hypotheses, while at the same time rejecting contrary hypotheses which proceed by postulate as being inadmissible. This is because the target of empiricist critique is a claim contrary to E+ (the empiricist dogma), and this contrary claim is also a factual hypothesis and as such cannot be rejected from the outset (van Fraassen 2002, p. 46). Examples of candidates for such an empiricist thesis is that asserted by the Modern Empiricists and their foundational empiricist thesis that all the mind has access to are ideas, and these ideas are furnished through experience, and that experience is the foundation for all knowledge. The opposing thesis is the Rationalist thesis that certain ideas are innate, and

knowledge is founded *a priori* through deductive proofs. The rationalist thesis is anathema to empiricism, but it *is* a factual thesis and must be admitted as an admissible hypothesis and cannot be rejected from the outset.

Van Fraassen concludes that there is *no* factual thesis that can both be invulnerable to the empiricist critique, and be the basis for the empiricist critique of metaphysics (2002, p. 46). Empiricism then is revealed as a philosophical position which is incoherent. So, we cannot establish a legitimate thesis for empiricism. Therefore, empiricism, as a philosophical position adhering to a thesis or empiricist dogma, is reduced to absurdity and disastrous failure.⁴ The conclusion is that to save empiricism from absurdity we must violate Principle Zero and assert that a philosophical position does not need to be established on a thesis, or dogma (van Fraassen 2002, p. 46).

1.2 The Last Chance for Empiricism: Embracing the Stance.

So what is left for empiricists? Looking at the history of philosophy we see that there is not an explicit factual thesis which every empiricist philosopher has endorsed and adhered to. Furthermore, taking empiricism as a position which is constituted by a thesis or dogma, leads to disastrous failure resulting in a vicious circle, a regress, a metaphysical postulate, or an incoherent position. So what is an empiricist to do? If we are to endorse empiricism as a viable philosophical position we must violate Principle Zero - we must endorse empiricism as a *stance*, rather than a factual thesis. In doing so we must recognize that a philosophical position can be, and is, more than merely a belief

⁴ It is worth noting here that as previously mentioned van Fraassen does not express any specific dogma that would be E+. He expresses in his 2004 paper that the preceding argument does not pertain to any statement that "has been or could be offered as the doctrine of empiricism" (2004, p. 172). What this argument demonstrates is the role that such a doctrine would have to play, and from this has deduced that "doctrine empiricism" is an untenable position no matter what we take E+ to be.

in what the world is like (van Fraassen 2002, p. 47). A philosophical position can consist in a stance. But what exactly is a stance?

1.2.1 What is a Stance?

As has been argued by van Fraassen, empiricism has changed throughout history and recast in each generation, but there must be something which endures throughout each successive generation of empiricism – there must be a *spirit of empiricism*.⁵ Essential to the concept of stances is van Fraassen’s meta-philosophical view on the endeavour of philosophy and what he refers to as *false consciousness*. A philosophical position is in false consciousness when it is seen as endorsing a theory when in reality it is merely expressing an attitude (van Fraassen 2002, p. 50). Empiricism is in false consciousness when it is conceived of as expressing a substantive theory or thesis. To avoid false consciousness a philosopher must possess the spirit of his or her philosophical position, not confuse it with any sort of position advocating a factual thesis, and *understand* that they are expressing their attitudes (van Fraassen 2002, p. 60). Van Fraassen characterizes a stance as being a certain “attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such – possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well” (2002, pp. 47-48). He emphasizes that a stance will involve beliefs and opinions, but will involve much more than these beliefs and opinion - it will not be identifiable through these beliefs and opinions, and furthermore can endure through changes in beliefs and opinions (2002, p. 62). This is the initial sketch of stances provided by van Fraassen. This sketch, however, is rather brief and quite vague; and moreover, it does not clearly characterize what an

⁵ Van Fraassen does not use the term “spirit of empiricism” explicitly. The term is used in his discussion of how we can view Materialism as a stance he asserts: “Materialism is a hardy philosophical tradition that appears differently substantiated in each philosophical tradition that appears differently substantiated in each philosophical era. Each instantiation has its empirical as well as its nonempirical claims, which for that era, in its own terms, the invariant attitudes and convictions that I call here the “spirit of materialism.”” (2002, p. 58).

empirical stance is or entails in terms of these aforementioned elements. To get a fuller conception of stances and stance-empiricism we must look at van Fraassen's meta-philosophical theory of epistemic voluntarism - the meta-stance.

1.2.2 The Meta-Stance.

A key concept behind understanding that a philosophical position can consist in a stance is van Fraassen's meta-philosophical project of epistemic voluntarism. Van Fraassen most notably calls for a turn to voluntarist epistemology in *The Empirical Stance*, and in his 2000 paper "The False Hopes of Traditional Epistemology."⁶ He proposes that in searching for a viable empiricist epistemology we must take a step back and look at different approaches to knowledge, belief, and opinion. He advocates a turn to voluntarist epistemology where "our doxastic and epistemic life is then conceived of as itself an enterprise, involving certain ineliminably subjective choices" ("Précis of 'The Empirical Stance'" 2004, p. 129). Epistemic voluntarism is put forward as an alternative to what may be considered more traditional epistemic theories which he refers to as "objectifying" epistemologies. "Objectifying" epistemologies are what most philosophers would commonly list if they were asked to name various epistemological theories. Van Fraassen uses the term "objectifying" to refer to epistemologies that engage in factual, theory-writing projects, and which strive to develop theories of cognitive functioning (2002, pp. 75-76). Examples of objectifying epistemologies are such theories as externalism, internalism, reliabilism, inductivism, foundationalism (van Fraassen 2002, p. 78), and forms of Naturalism (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 74-76). These types of theories are considered "objective" as they are undertaken in much the same way as our "objective"

⁶ Van Fraassen, Bas C. "The False Hopes of Traditional Epistemology." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60.2 (2000): 253-280

sciences. In developing scientific theories we try to put ourselves in an objective situation by taking ourselves out of the picture, by distancing ourselves from the object of study making value neutral assessments and observations, and finally having an often predetermined result in mind which we are trying to achieve (a theory we are trying to prove) (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 156-159). “Objectifying” epistemologies in an analogous way strive to develop value-neutral theories of the way the world is, and see our epistemic enterprise as an endeavour of objective epistemic gains.

In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen’s primary focus for rejecting “objectifying” epistemology is that epistemic theories of this kind cannot cope with radical conversion in conceptual and scientific revolutions. This is because these epistemologies in their theory writing projects draw upon our current theories which capture our view of the world. Two examples of “objectifying” epistemologies which draw upon held world views are Foundationalist theories in the Modern Period, and current forms of Epistemic Naturalism. Examples of Foundationalist theories in the modern period are British Empiricism, and Cartesian Rationalism. Both of these theories draw upon the *theory of ideas*: that all that the mind has access to are sensory impressions and ideas, and that we do not experience the material world directly. More contemporary theories of Naturalism in epistemology draw upon scientific theories in cognitive science to establish their theories of how we form beliefs. For example, Quine’s theory of Naturalized Epistemology advocates a movement towards looking to empirical psychology in developing our theories (Quine, 533-534). The result of our epistemology drawing upon our current world view is that we must automatically rule out any way of coming to know that we ourselves do not fit our present conceptual or scientific view of the world. Any

theory of knowledge which we produce will have to adhere to the conceptual and scientific view it is drawing upon, and we will not be able to establish an epistemology which does not conform to this world view. The problem which emerges for objectifying epistemologies is that they cannot survive radical conversion during conceptual and scientific revolutions. "Objectifying" epistemologies, according to van Fraassen, give us a view of knowledge which is "invariant under such transformations" (2002, p. 80-81). This is because they are tied to the conceptual and scientific paradigm which they draw upon, and when that paradigm is abandoned we must also abandon the theories which draw upon it. For example in establishing a Naturalist epistemology which draws on our current theories of cognitive science to establish how we form beliefs, if the currently held scientific theory gets proven wrong and subsequently rejected, our epistemology which draws on that theory will have to go with it. A proposed solution which is given consideration is that the theory which the "objectifying" epistemologist is drawing upon is taken as merely a working hypothesis, and they accept that the theory could be proven wrong. According to van Fraassen the problem here is that if an epistemologist accepts this fallibilist position, then they must admit that the theory they are establishing is either incomplete, or potentially incorrect. I take it that this is because a philosopher advocating such a fallibilist view, will have to admit that they have not given us an infallible theory of what the world *is* like. Van Fraassen submits that philosophers engaging in these types of "objectifying" epistemologies should either give up epistemology, and perhaps engage in hard empirical science, or be content with a theory which cannot survive radical conceptual and scientific revolutions.

So as epistemologists, what other options do we have if “objectifying” epistemology is seemingly so problematic? Van Fraassen asserts that we can reject “objectifying” epistemology and endorse a different meta-epistemological way to view knowledge, belief, and opinion, and we can develop philosophical positions which can endure the tumultuous upheavals of conceptual and scientific revolutions. He feels that there is an alternative to “objectifying” epistemologies, which engage in objective theory writing projects that strive to produce theories as a sort of “methodological cookbook” (2002, p. 88) which describe systematic cognitive functioning, or strive to tell us the way the world is. Instead we can embrace a meta-epistemological view which takes into account the ineliminable subjective elements of our epistemic life, and strives to develop theories which act as tactics and strategies that are appropriate to certain criteria of evaluation (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 82, 88). This alternative meta-epistemology he calls *voluntarism*. (I will refer to his view as epistemic voluntarism.)

In van Fraassen’s 2000 paper he asserts that “epistemology cannot adequately proceed in isolation from value theory – that the epistemic enterprise cannot be adequately conceived without attention to the role of value judgements, intentions, commitments, decisions, and other aspects of praxis” (2000, 273). In *The Empirical Stance* he puts forward that in our epistemic lives we are engaged in an epistemic enterprise, an “epistemic pursuit, so to speak, pursuit of epistemic goals, of cognitive gain...individually and as a community, a culture, a civilization” (2002, p. 82). Furthermore, he asserts that we must recognize that in our epistemic enterprise there are involved certain subjective choices which are affected by our particular value judgements. Van Fraassen then goes on to put forth a neo-Jamesian account of what we

can establish as the goal or *telos* of this epistemic enterprise. He asserts that this epistemic enterprise is conducted with two ends: to strive for truth and avoid error. This is taken directly from William James' *The Will to Believe* where he asserts that

there are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion... *we must know the truth*; and *we must avoid error* – these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. (James, 522)

Van Fraassen points out that this two pronged goal is at odds with itself and it pulls us in two opposite directions, belief and skepticism. Finding the balance, the “golden ratio of truth believed and error avoided” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 87), requires us as subjective epistemic agents to make a value judgment. Here we begin to see where subjective elements intrude into our epistemic enterprise - we are the ones who are to make this value judgement. He points out that truth and error may be objective, but establishing a well-balanced opinion between belief and skepticism requires an inherently subjective choice that we cannot avoid.

A further subjective element of our epistemic enterprise is that we do not simply have a desire for knowledge full stop; rather, we are engaged in a subjective inquiry; we want information that concerns *us*. As we weigh the value of truth gained and error avoided we are also taking into account what kind of information it is and what it is about. If our enterprise was just knowledge writ large we would, as van Fraassen, says “...be obsessively reading encyclopedias and dictionaries, *People* magazine, and *National Geographic*” (2002, p. 88) trying to accrue as much information as we could to satisfy our epistemic ends. Clearly this is a *reductio*; however, it raises a legitimate point about how we are not concerned about most of the information in our epistemic life, and

that in our epistemic enterprise we restrict our scope of investigation to matters which are relevant to us personally.

There is also a more public element of our epistemic lives which van Fraassen points out and touches on only briefly - that we are part of an “information economy”⁷. In this information economy, when deciding what information concerns *us*, we also take into account that certain types of information are more publicly valuable than others, and what types of information others will want from us when conducting our investigations.

Van Fraassen asserts that once we recognize the various sorts of subjective value judgments that play an essential role in our epistemic lives, we can see that objective, value-neutral theories in epistemology which strive to establish what the world is like, or how we cognitively function lose plausibility (2002, p. 89). Van Fraassen’s proposed alternative is to establish an epistemic enterprise which takes into account the subjective elements of our epistemic lives, and which focusses on developing, appropriate strategies, and tactics for epistemic investigation. Our epistemologies then should be undertaken as strategies of investigation, and here we have an insight into what a stance perhaps is/entails – it can be seen as a strategy of investigation.

1.3 Stance-ism: Trying to Put it All Together.

Looking at van Fraassen’s proposal of stance empiricism I have found there are three layers which make up van Fraassen’s stance-ism: from the bottom up there is *the empirical stance*, there are *stances*, and there is *epistemic voluntarism* which is the meta-stance. At the meta-philosophical level of epistemic voluntarism we are said to be

⁷ This is a term coined by Jeffrey Foss in his “Materialism, Reduction, Replacement, and the Place of Consciousness in Science” (1995). Where he argues for the unification of scientific theory in terms of an information exchange where varying theories will mutually reinforce each other.

involved in an epistemic enterprise, and our epistemologies at the level of philosophical positions should develop and act as strategies of investigation. Given that van Fraassen conceives of our epistemic life as an enterprise, and has asserted that our epistemologies should develop theories that act as strategies for investigation, the clearest indication we can draw from this is that a stance is a type of strategy, involving the values, attitudes, commitments and approaches we take in our epistemic enterprise. The empirical stance then is seen as just one of many potential stances which one could take.

Recall that van Fraassen asserts that throughout the history of empiricism we see a recurring rebellion against a particular type of metaphysical theorizing; furthermore, he has asserted that there must be a positive project for empiricism, and that that is the empirical stance. He characterized a stance as an attitude, commitment, an approach, etc. This characterization of what a stance itself is or entails is vague, and unclear. What we are offered is a series of vague predicates which are said to make up any given stance. So, the concept of a *stance* itself is somewhat vague. What the *empirical* stance is, however, is even more obscure, as we are not offered any clear cases of these predicates, and we have not been given an explicit insight into what is involved in stance empiricism in terms of these attitudes, commitments, approaches, etc. Van Fraassen has revealed at least two attitudes in the empirical stance which can be found in his first two characterizations of empiricism: A rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and a strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) that proceed by postulation. Dissatisfaction *is* an attitude, by definition it is the attitude of not being satisfied; however this attitude is rather negative, and van Fraassen has exclaimed that there must be a positive project for empiricism.

So, what are empiricists historically satisfied with that would reveal a positive project? Van Fraassen *does* give us one such positive attitude: he asserts that one of the most central attitudes to empiricism is that science is seen as a “paradigm of rational inquiry” (2002, p. 63). This positive attitude towards science can be seen in empiricism as far back as the Modern Period in Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, where he takes Newton’s method of investigation through observation and experiment as just such a paradigm of rational inquiry. Moreover, this positive attitude towards science can be found in the 20th Century with the Positivists, many of whom were in fact practicing empirical scientists. So it has been revealed that empiricists see the method of investigation found in the sciences as a satisfying form of inquiry. In trying to capture empiricism as a stance, a corresponding commitment empiricists would hold is commitment to this type of inquiry. This I submit is the clearest characterization of the attitude – the spirit – of empiricism that has been provided, or that can be seen from the brief sketch provided by van Fraassen. However, as I will go on to discuss in the following chapters, in attempting to further clarify what the empirical stance is or entails we are ultimately cast further into obscurity and we are left with an unsatisfying, and problematically vague concept.

However, before I proceed in attempting to further illuminate what the empirical stance is or entails, in the next chapter I will address a prominent critique which has been put forward against van Fraassen’s stance-ism, and against endorsing empiricism as a stance in particular. This critique is that stances, being established on subjective values, attitudes, commitments, and approach, etc. are inherently relativistic and that in light of the relative nature of stances if we endorse our philosophical positions as such we will be

unable to engage in legitimate philosophical discourse or dispute between opposing stances. This is problematic for stance empiricism as this relativism will render the stance empiricists critique of metaphysics essentially moot; furthermore, it has been argued that if we are to conceive of our philosophical positions as stances, in general, the inherently relativistic nature of stances will lead to a stagnation of philosophical progress.

Chapter 2. “Some Say the View is Crazy, But You May Adopt Another Point of View.” Stances and Relativism.

According to van Fraassen a stance is, or involves, attitudes, commitments, and an approach (2002, p. 47); furthermore, he has asserted that we must take into account the subjective values and value judgments that are involved in our epistemic life and our epistemologies (2004, p. 274). All of these subjective elements of a stance have led to the charge that stances are inherently, and problematically, relativistic. This is because individuals establish their particular stance on account of their values, attitudes, commitments, and approaches, and these vary from person to person. The charge of relativism here is because a stance will be held, defended, and justified, relative to a particular philosopher's values, attitudes, commitments, etc. This defence, however, may not be held by those holding different values, attitudes, etc., so the rightness of a stance will be found relative to these subjective elements. In other words, there is no absolute justification for any stance. In light of the inherently subjective nature of stances, it has been argued that the resulting relativism between stances is philosophically problematic. The charge of relativism has three corresponding concerns: The first is put forward by Anja Jauernig (2007), who is skeptical of our ability to offer a legitimate critique in the philosophical arena when we are disagreeing about subjective values. The second and third are voiced by Dien Ho (2007), who, similarly to Jauernig, does not think we will be able to resolve a conflict of values through legitimate philosophical means, and furthermore is concerned that if we cannot come to a consensus about which philosophical position to endorse, this will stifle philosophical progress.

In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen has asserted that the most salient thread which ties together the various philosophers throughout history who we call empiricists is a recurring critique of metaphysical theorizing (2002, pp. 36-37). The charge of relativism is of particular concern to stance empiricism, as this recurrent critique of metaphysical theorizing results in the first two *characteristics of empiricism*. If it turns out that we are not able to provide legitimate philosophical critiques of opposing stances, then it seems that stance empiricism will have to do away with, historically, one of empiricisms most defining elements - the empiricist tradition of critiquing metaphysical theorizing. If stance empiricism cannot maintain this tradition then we will find stance empiricism further cast into obscurity, as it will not be able to legitimately maintain one of its most defining features.

This chapter admittedly makes a much more positive appraisal of van Fraassen's stance-ism than what will come to follow in my remaining chapters. This is because I think that van Fraassen, and Chakravartty, who advocates his stance-ism, have supplied a legitimate appraisal of philosophy, and have in light of it offered a useful framework for how we can engage in legitimate philosophical dispute between stances. In this chapter I will argue that we *do* have the means to engage in constructive philosophical discourse about values, and that the relativistic nature of stances does *not* stifle philosophical debate or progress. So we can still retain a critique of metaphysics as a touchstone for understanding what stance empiricism is or entails; however, I must make explicit that this still does not offer us insights into the positive elements of stance empiricism.

In Section One I will discuss the concern that a philosophical position, if taken as a stance, will be unable to offer a legitimate philosophical critique of an opposing stance.

I will discuss an argument by Anja Jauernig according to which disagreement about values is essentially a disagreement about preferences and sentiments, and that these are not grounds for legitimate philosophical critique. I argue that the values found within our stances are more than mere preferences, and that they offer a more substantial target for philosophical dispute. I will go on to discuss a potential avenue for philosophical dispute that has been alluded to by van Fraassen in *The Empirical Stance*, as well as a similar proposal by Anjan Chakravartty, and show that we do have means to engage in philosophical disputes and constructive discourse at the level of stances.

In Section Two I will discuss the second problem, regarding how we can resolve a conflict of values through legitimate philosophical means. Dien Ho recognizes a potential avenue for dispute that can be taken between stances, and argues that it leaves open the problem of how we can resolve disputes, as we cannot offer a legitimate philosophical means to convince our opponent to change their stance. In response to these concerns by Ho, van Fraassen has briefly pointed to two avenues that can be taken to convince our opponents by legitimate philosophical means to change their stance. In addition to further clarifying and explaining the difficulty of trying to get our opponent's to change their stance, I argue that these proposals point to a philosophically legitimate means by which to try to convince our opponent to change their stance.

In Section Three I discuss the further concern that despite all of these potential means to engage in philosophical dispute, we still face the potential outcome of reaching an impasse when we are engaging in disputes at the level of stances. If we come to an impasse at the level of stances we will have to remain tolerant in the face of opposing stances, and this realization has led to the concern about how we can make progress in

philosophy if we reach a stalemate in our disputes. I address this issue by calling on a paper by Chakravartty which discusses: firstly, how we can still engage in dispute when our stances are both *rationaly permissible* by analyzing the beliefs generated by our stances; and secondly, how the conception that philosophy does not make progress is misguided. In light of these further considerations by Charavartty, I argue that the concern over progress in philosophy is ill-conceived, because it does not recognize the kind of progress which philosophy admits, and that we can make positive progress at the level of stances.

2.1 Relativism, Stances, and the Problem of Legitimate Philosophical Critique.

2.1.1 Jauernig: The Empirical Stance Cannot Provide an Adequate Critique of Metaphysics.

In Jauernig's 2007 paper⁸ she argues that stance empiricism will not be able to provide a legitimate philosophical critique of metaphysics, and indeed any stance philosophy will have to remain tolerant in the face of opposing stances. The reason for this is that a stance is held or established on the basis of subjective value judgments. Jauernig puts forward two ways to understand value judgments: the cognitivist view, and the non-cognitivist view. On the cognitivist view, value judgments are expressions of beliefs about normative facts. On the non-cognitivist view, they are expressions of personal values and sentiments (Jauernig, p. 291). Jauernig argues that ultimately either view is problematic for stance empiricism and its critique of metaphysics. The cognitivist view is problematic, because if we view our value judgments as reporting facts, the stance empiricist will be forced to admit incompatible stances owing to his or her endorsement

⁸ Jauernig, Anja. "Must Empiricism Be a Stance, and Could it Be One? How To Be an Empiricist and a Philosopher at the Same Time." *Images of Empiricism*. Ed. Bradley Monton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 271-318.

of the *third characteristic of empiricism* (as in science, so in philosophy: disagreement with any admissible factual hypothesis is admissible (van Fraassen 2002, p. 43)). The admissibility of opposing stances, however, is not a tenable option given stance empiricism's corresponding critique of metaphysics. This is because we cannot at once admit and reject an opposing stance. Our only other option is for us to recognize that our value judgments do not report facts, but rather only personal values and sentiments (Jauernig, p. 291). But, this conclusion is still problematic for stance empiricism and its corresponding critique of metaphysics. The problem with our stances being established on our values, attitudes, and commitments is that the stance empiricist's radical critique of metaphysics will amount to nothing more than the expression of certain disagreements in personal taste and sentiment, i.e. our subjective values and attitudes. The stance empiricist's critique of metaphysics, if taken in this light, cannot be taken as a legitimate philosophical critique. Jauernig asserts that a legitimate criticism is possible only if we can see that a mistake has been made; however, we cannot really be mistaken about our values, as they are not truth evaluable facts (p. 307).

Jauernig argues that if we are to embrace the notion of philosophical stances, and if stances cannot be legitimately critiqued, then we must maintain an attitude of tolerance, and we should not mount an outright rejection of opposing stances in "the public philosophical arena – at least not if [we don't] want to come across as an empiricist chauvinist" (p. 306). This is because in the philosophical arena dislike and derision on the level of personal preferences and sentiments does not constitute a *legitimate* philosophical critique, just sabre rattling. She raises the concern that if our differing philosophical stances come down to the expression of values, attitudes, commitments and

other personal sentiments, then this will mark the end of philosophical debate (p. 307).

We will have arrived at an impasse, as any further criticism will not amount to a legitimate philosophical critique, and the stance empiricist's critique of metaphysics will amount to nothing more than the assertion that they just don't like metaphysics (Jauernig, pp. 306-307).

2.1.2 Are Our Values Just Preferences and Sentiments?

The criticism put forward by Jauernig is not a problem only for stance empiricism; it is a problem for any philosophical stance which wishes to criticize an opposing stance. It seems that any philosopher who is opposed to a particular stance will have to concede that he or she merely does not like it. But is this right?

Before I address how we can engage in philosophical discourse about values, I would like to address the assertion that we can equate values with preferences and sentiments. I think that this is a somewhat naïve way to portray the role that values, and value judgements, play in stances, and in our epistemic lives. The philosophical positions that we hold and the values, attitudes, commitments, and approaches we take in our epistemic life are philosophically *momentous*. These subjective elements are philosophically *momentous* because they form our epistemic world view. A preference, on the other hand, is not really philosophically *momentous*. Characterizing our values as preferences makes them appear rather trifling, almost as if it is a difference of taste. According to van Fraassen's characterization of stances, and the role that our values play in our epistemic life, we can see that our values are not arbitrary, and so they should not be so easily conflated with mere preferences. Furthermore, in response to Jauernig, van Fraassen has pointed out that the logic of value judgments shows that they cannot be so

easily equated with preferences. He says “we can quite consistently express personal preferences at odds with what we admit to be real values, or make negative value judgements about our own preferences” (2007, p. 375). I think that this is correct; we can easily conceive of personal values which may be at odds with what we prefer. When we look at certain moral conflicts we can see this division between values and preferences quite clearly. For example, even if someone is in a position where they will not get caught, they can choose to not steal something on account of their *values*, even though they would *prefer* to not pay for it. We can see this division between values and preferences in our epistemic life as well. For example, in our philosophy of science we may prefer to have an elegant explanation of scientific laws which shows how they are reducible in a unified scientific theory, but the value we place on observational evidence, and our commitment to the evidence it yields, may be at odds with the preference of simplicity and elegance. Thus, the conflation of values with preferences does not appear to adequately represent the role that these values play in stances; furthermore, as van Fraassen has pointed out, there is nothing incoherent in our values and preferences disagreeing with each other. From these considerations we can see that the values in our philosophical positions should not be conflated with preferences, and that a value is a more substantive target for philosophical critique.

2.1.3 The Prospect for Legitimate Philosophical Engagement Between Stances.

Even if it is conceded that values are not merely preferences, we still have the issue of how we can engage in disputes about values. It is held that the impasse that stances face is a result of values not being truth evaluable in the same way that facts are. Recall Jauernig's point that a critique is possible only if a mistake has been made, but we cannot be mistaken about values. So the question which must be answered if we are to avoid a relativistic impasse between opposing stances is: given that stances are not truth-apt, how can we offer a legitimate criticism of something which our opponent cannot be mistaken about (their values, attitudes, and commitments)?

In response to this concern over engaging in disputes about values, van Fraassen has argued that the gap between facts and values is not an obstacle for our ability to engage in philosophical dispute. In *The Empirical Stance* he addresses this issue briefly by pointing out that:

We too are members of a highly politicised open society in which ethical and ideological differences are precisely what are most up for debate. We need not look far to see that rational discourse is possible on matters that touch our values, attitudes and commitments. So I'd just like to say: look around you, take part, welcome to the real world! (van Fraassen 2002, p. 62).

This statement, though brief, and somewhat dismissive of the gravity of the issue, is apt.

When we meet someone with different ideological differences we often strive to convince them of the problem with their view by pointing out inconsistencies in their held values.

So, we already have a method with which we can engage in constructive philosophical debates when we are in disagreement about subjective values. When we are in a philosophical disagreement about values, attitudes, and commitments in the ethical and political domains, we generally (if maintaining a rationally civil conversation) strive to illuminate inconsistencies in our opponent's view by showing that values that our

opponent either implicitly or explicitly endorses are in conflict. We can use this same method in resolving conflicts about stances.

Recall that a stance is a cluster of values, attitudes, commitments, and approaches. In his 2004 paper van Fraassen comments that these elements cannot be easily disentangled; furthermore, on his conception of epistemic voluntarism a position is rationally permissible if it is logically coherent and internally consistent. According to van Fraassen what unifies all of the various concepts within the cluster concept of a stance is “pragmatic consistency” (2004, p. 176). Regarding his comment that the various concepts cannot be easily disentangled from each other, he points out how, for example, we cannot have commitments and intentions without corresponding beliefs and opinions. We cannot be committed to a certain course of action without having a belief guiding that commitment to action. To have a commitment without a belief in that commitment is to express a pragmatically incoherent opinion. Van Fraassen clarifies this point by explaining that there is no logical incoherence in the statement that Peter intends to become a hippopotamus even though he believes he cannot, this conjunction can be logically true (2004, p. 176). The aforementioned statement, however, is pragmatically incoherent in that it is broadly “Moore paradoxical” and is akin to an assertion of the form “P, and I do not believe that P” (2004, p. 176). This example by van Fraassen also serves to better clarify the distinction between logical consistency and pragmatic coherence, and how both are required for a stance to be rationally permissible.

A key concept involved in epistemic voluntarism is van Fraassen’s conception of rational permissibility. He touches on this concept in a number of his works, in both his 2000 paper and in *The Empirical Stance* he proposes that what is rational is what is

rationality is bridled irrationality (2002, p. 92). On van Fraassen's view, we are rational in believing something exactly when we are not rationally compelled to believe the opposite (as is appropriate for a voluntarist philosophy); we require nothing more than logical and pragmatic consistency; so, any coherent position, that is a position which satisfies these criteria, is rational. So in endorsing a particular stance, which has been established on the basis of our subjective values, we can advocate that stance as rational if we see it as rationally permissible. In his 2000 paper he makes clear that this implication does not allow for an 'anything goes' attitude to taking a particular philosophical position. Potentially there may be an infinite number of coherent alternatives to our posterior position, but almost none of these will be seen as viable options for us. This is because we have prior opinions, prior understandings and values which make these other options dead to us (van Fraassen 2000, p. 278).

Taking this call for coherence into account we can see a viable means to engage in legitimate philosophical discourse at the level of stances - by appealing to the notion of rational permissibility. This solution, which Anjan Chakravartty (2004)⁹ has advocated, resolves the problem of relativism in stances. Chakravartty has provided what I see as a viable means of engaging in constructive philosophical discourse employing legitimate philosophical critiques. He argues that at the level of stances we can engage in constructive discourse by showing that our opponent's stance is incoherent by their own lights, and that our stance is coherent by our own lights, thereby showing that our opponent's stance is rationally impermissible.

⁹ Chakravartty, Anjan. "Stance Relativism: Empiricism versus Metaphysics." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*. 35 (2004): 173-184.

The conception of rationality put forward by van Fraassen is quite thin.

Chakravartty explains that logical consistency and pragmatic coherence seem to be too low a threshold for establishing rationality in general. So, he puts forward a modification on this original conception of rationality. On the modified version of rational permissibility

[It is] rational to adopt any stance and resulting beliefs that are consistent, incorporating such ampliative inferential practices as are minimally required for the generation of acceptable beliefs. On this view a stance empiricist rejects metaphysics by committing to epistemic policies which are incompatible with metaphysics. (Chakravartty 2004, pp. 180-181)

Chakravartty admits that this form of rejection by stance empiricists does not offer much of a case against metaphysics, and that it is hardly a critique. But he submits that we can engage in debate between stances by analyzing the rational permissibility of our opponent's stance. In this way we can critique our opponent's view for being incoherent. By showing (similarly to how we engage in ethical and political disputes) that the values, attitudes, and commitments that they hold either implicitly or explicitly are in conflict, we can criticize our opponent's stance with being rationally impermissible. This proposed means of engagement between stances shows that we can still legitimately critique our opponent's stance, and that we do not have to settle at an impasse when our philosophical positions reach a conflict over the subjective elements which make up a stance.

This solution which is alluded to by van Fraassen and argued for by Chakravartty leaves a further problem, which emerges in regard to conflicts between opposing stances: what if our opponent's stance *is* rationally permissible? The solution offered above by Chakravartty only really works if we can find inconsistencies in our opponent's stance. Chakravartty does make clear that it *could* turn out that competing views are both

rationally, and pragmatically consistent; but he adds that so long as we are working on various possibilities, and there are different and competing views on the table, there is still a future for debate and constructive engagement in philosophy at the level of stances. We reach an impasse only if we make the *assumption* that opposing stances meet the constraints of rationality (Chakravartty 2004, p. 183). So, we can avoid this philosophical stalemate by avoiding this assumption and critically examining our opponent's stance; also, we can critically examine our given stances, and the beliefs that they promote, to see if our stances are internally consistent and coherent. This *sounds* good, and if we are to be good empiricists we should avoid making such an *a priori* assumption that our opponent's view meets the constraints of rationality. But the problem still lingers: What if, as is logically possible, even after taking the steps just outlined, we find opposing stances which are rationally permissible? In his concluding remarks Chakravartty says that this hypothetical outcome is not really *so* terrible, indeed "... there may be more than one way to skin reality" (2004, p. 183). But say that we *do* come across mutually exclusive yet internally coherent stances, how will we be able to convince our opponent to change their stance through legitimate philosophical means? And, how will constructive philosophical discourse commence which will yield progress in philosophy? These are the concerns voiced by Ho in his 2007¹⁰ criticism of van Frassen's *The Empirical Stance*.

¹⁰ Ho, Dien. "Farewell to Empiricism." *Images of Empiricism*. Ed. Bradley Monton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.319-333.

2.3 Relativism, Stances, and Philosophical Conversion.

2.3.1 Ho: The Problem of Conversion Between Stances.

Ho asserts that if a philosophical disagreement is regarding non-factive differences, then the dispute is not resolvable, as in principle a conflict is only resolvable if it concerns matters of fact (p. 327). Ho recognizes that we can offer critiques of opposing stances by showing inconsistencies in our opponent's collective values (p. 328), and rebuts van Fraassen's assertion that "we need not look far to see that rational discourse is possible on matters that touch our values attitudes and commitments" (van Fraassen 2002, p. 62). Ho argues that if our opponent's web of values, attitudes, and commitments *is* internally coherent, we will be unable to resolve our philosophical dispute, because we will not be able to convince our opponent to change their stance through legitimate philosophical means.

Ho calls upon Hume's 'is'/'ought' gap to show how we cannot logically convince our opponent to change their values. Hume's worry is that we cannot derive an 'ought' (a prescriptive conclusion) from an 'is' (descriptive premises regarding the way things are), or rather that no amount of factual claims can substantiate or refute an 'ought' claim. The problem that this fact/value gap holds for promoting philosophical positions as stances is that this gap shows that no amount of factual claims can convince someone to change their stance. If our opponent's stance is found to be coherent by its own lights then we are at an impasse when it comes to arguing why one 'ought' to change their value oriented stance. Ho proposes that the only way that we can try to change our opponent's mind is through coercion, that is, by engaging in philosophically chastised means. We will have to "bribe, confuse, seduce, threaten, and beg our opponent's to change their value

commitments” (Ho, p. 330). This proposal is, of course, not tenable, because if we opt for such methods we will be abandoning philosophy. So it seems that if we are to endorse a stance philosophy we must embrace relativism, and accept that we will eventually arrive at an impasse when our philosophical differences bottom out at the values of our respective stances.

Similarly to Jauernig, Ho concludes that if we are to embrace relativism then we must endorse a corresponding tolerance of opposing stances which are internally coherent. If our stances are relative then there is not one absolutely correct stance to take. In light of the relativistic nature of stances, we should not be hostile to an opposing stance which is coherent, and we should remain tolerant as we recognize that there is no one true stance. He calls upon van Fraassen’s assertion that conversion to a stance is similar to conversion to a religion, and puts forward that religious tolerance results from the recognition of the stance-like nature of religious belief (that it is value based, and contains a number of non-factive elements). It seems then that, as in religion, so in philosophical stances: we must be tolerant of contrary stances which are rationally permissible. This is problematic for the empirical stance and its critique of metaphysics, but it also problematic for philosophy in general. Ho remarks that if we endorse philosophical stances, and their corresponding relativism, we will have undermined the philosophical pursuit of uncovering *the* way that the world really is, which he asserts is philosophy’s reason for existence (p. 331). So, it seems that if we want to endorse our philosophical positions as stances, then we must recognize that our stances are relative, and thus we are left in a rather precarious situation: We can either coerce our opponents to change their stance through philosophically chastised means, or we can accept that we

may find ourselves at an impasse when our differing stances come down to our subjective values, and give up on philosophy's, alleged, *raison d'être* - the pursuit of finding out *the* way that the world really is. The first option leaves us to abandon philosophy and engage in sophistry, the second option is said to raise concerns about our ability to make philosophical progress.

2.3.2 Prospects For Constructive Philosophical Discourse at the Level of Stances.

Van Fraassen's responses to both Jauernig and Ho, in his 2007 paper "From a View of Science to a New Empiricism,"¹¹ are somewhat brief, but he proposes two responses to the concern that disagreement about values leads to relativism that stifles philosophical discourse, and leads to a stagnation of philosophical progress. First, he argues that we can resolve disputes over values similarly to how we resolve disputes about facts. Second, he suggests potential avenues to convert someone to a stance by legitimate philosophical means.

In response to the concern that we cannot resolve disputes over values because they are non-factive, van Fraassen concedes that we cannot deduce an 'ought' from an 'is', that we cannot appeal to facts in order demonstrate values. He asserts, however, that the truth-evaluable difference between facts and values is not an unbridgeable gap, arguing that there is a parallel between how we resolve disputes over facts, and the way that we can resolve disputes over values. He proposes that in just the same way as we settle factual disagreements, we can settle value disagreements. He points out that a factual disagreement can only be resolved if we share certain background beliefs. For

¹¹ Van Fraassen, Bas C. "From a View of Science to a New Empiricism." *Images of Empiricism*. Ed. Bradley Monton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 337-381.

example, someone may think that the song “Respect” was originally written and performed by Aretha Franklin, and disagree with the (correct) assertion made by another that the song was originally written and recorded by Otis Redding. We can resolve this dispute by showing this person the copyright on Redding’s 1965 album “Otis Blue” (on which the song was originally released). We can resolve this dispute, as van Fraassen says, “just by looking at the facts” (2007, p. 377), but only if we share certain background beliefs that the copyright on an album is a legitimate authority for establishing authorship. So, when we have a factual disagreement, we settle this dispute by looking at the facts, but we can only come to an agreement about what those facts show us if we share certain background beliefs. Similarly, if we have a disagreement about values we can settle our dispute only if we share certain values. We can show that our opponents’ views do not endorse certain commitments, attitudes, and values that they either explicitly or implicitly endorse, and we can convince them to adopt a different view which does endorse the virtues which they hold. So just in the same way that we resolve factual disagreements, *mutatis mutandis*, we can resolve value disagreements (van Fraassen 2007, p. 377).

This method for resolving disputes about values is in line with van Fraassen’s proposal for engaging in debate between stances found in *The Empirical Stance* which was previously discussed. When we meet someone with different ideological differences we strive to convince them of the problem with their view by pointing out inconsistencies in their held values. We point out how a value which they hold is opposed to other values which they hold, and we show our opponent that these values which they hold are

cohesively endorsed in our own view. So, we have a method with which we can resolve a dispute, and convince our opponent to change their stance by appealing to their values.

Van Fraassen admits that pointing to the mere possibility of dialogue does not serve him sufficiently to alleviate these aforementioned concerns. Furthermore, he admits that at the time this response was produced he had not developed a full conception of our values that allows us to maintain our own position while simultaneously understanding our opponent's. He adds that the need to articulate such a conception of values is not only a task for stance empiricism, but is a need that we, as philosophers, all have (2007, p. 375). Although this proposal is a first take on the issue, we can already see a problem – if our opponent holds an opposing stance, and shares none of our values, how can we get them to change their stance through legitimate philosophical means?

Van Fraassen recognizes that the aforementioned solution does not adequately address the problem of resolving disputes between stances which are both internally coherent, and which do not share similar values; but in addition to this problem something van Fraassen has not pointed out is that we are back in our original problem of not being able to provide a critique of an opposing stance. According to the previous proposal we will be able to convince our opponent to change their stance only if they share our values; furthermore, we will only be able to offer a critique of our opponent's stance if it is incoherent. So, the problem remains: If we do not share certain values, then it seems we will have to resort to non-philosophical means in order to get our opponent to change their stance, or we must remain tolerant, and again we cannot offer a legitimate critique. Van Fraassen goes on to claim that we do have alternatives to either a relativistic impasse or sophistry, and that these alternatives are rather naïve extremes. He proposes,

however briefly, that we *can* find ways to legitimately convince our opponent to change their stance even if they do not share our values:

What about showing [our opponent's] possibilities in the human condition they had not already apprehended? What about opening new vistas for them about what the world is or could be like? Why this skepticism about human communication that would make it inconceivable that we can show for example metaphysicians how attractive empiricism is, just as we can show people who grew up quite differently just how attractive a life of charity and tolerance toward all can be? (van Fraassen 2007, p. 378).

The problem which van Fraassen faces is that this proposal of showing alternative possibilities in the human condition and opening new vistas for what the world could be like does not offer much in the way of a critique. If empiricism is to hold on to its critique of metaphysics, which is apparently one of its most salient characteristics, then it needs to do more than show possibilities in the human condition, and open new vistas about what the world could be like, because the possibility of mere dialogue does not clearly offer us a means of legitimate philosophical dispute. This is a concern held by Jauernig and Ho, and it is a concern which has not been reconciled with the aforementioned proposals. The only way it seems that we could go about a critique is if we go with van Fraassen's first option of appealing to values, but the situation at hand is one where we do not have any shared values. So we are back into the original problem of not being able to critique an opposing stance if it is rationally permissible. Is there any way out of this problem? I submit that there is, and the way out has been illuminated by van Fraassen in this brief proposal for conversion.

Van Fraassen has put forward that conversion to a stance is like conversion to a religion. Taking this analogy seriously, we can see that the difficulty with stance conversion in the face of opposing yet rationally permissible stances is analogous to the problem of religious conversion when we face religious beliefs that are not *live options*.

Recall, that van Fraassen's meta-philosophical epistemic voluntarism is taken as a sort of neo-Jamesian form of voluntarism. In his 2000 paper, van Fraassen submits that only certain philosophical positions will be *live options* for us (2000, p. 278). In William James' "The Will to Believe" James explains that a *live option* is "one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed," a *dead option* is one which "refuses to scintillate with any credibility" (p. 519). As an example of the divide between *live* and *dead options*, James describes asking someone to believe in the Mahdi.¹² As an option for religious faith the Mahdi is not really a viable option for most people in North America raised as Atheists. For someone who is raised in the Middle East, however, this may appear among one of the mind's possibilities for religious belief. In light of the comparison of stance conversion to religious conversion, we can see the problem with trying to convince someone to change their stance. If conversion to a stance is like religious conversion, then trying to get our opponent to adopt our stance when we share none of the same values is like trying to convert an Anglo-American Atheist to believe in the Mahdi. The challenge we face is that we are not merely trying to get our opponent to change their stance; we are trying to get our opponent to adopt a stance that is seemingly not even a *live option* for them.

I propose that if a stance is to be a *live option* for someone it has to involve certain values which that person holds. In van Fraassen's discussion of what makes a philosophical position¹³ a *live option* he argues that despite the many alternative positions that may be available to us, almost none of them will be *live options* (2000, p. 278). This

¹² In Islam the Mahdi is the prophesized redeemer of Islam who will rule the world before judgment day, and rid it of evil.

¹³ In his 2000 paper he does not refer to philosophical positions as stances explicitly.

is because we have prior opinions, and prior understandings, and prior values, which make many of those options *dead* to us. If we do not share any of the values in an alternative position, then that position is a *dead option*. So, how can we make those options *live*?

Here is where we can see van Fraassen's latter proposal for stance conversion play its role. Showing alternate possibilities in the human condition, and opening new vistas of what the world is, or could be like offers a way to breathe life into seemingly *dead options*. The role these methods can play in our philosophical discourse is a means to show our opponents that our values are values worth having. What this requires is an understanding of differing philosophical positions, the issues they are dealing with in their inquiry, and the attitudes and held values which underlie that position. This seems to be the only way to bridge our philosophical impasse if we are to try and convince our opponent to change their stance. If we can show our opponent that there are certain values which are worth adopting in regard to their epistemic inquiry, then we can adopt van Fraassen's first solution for debate at the level of values. If we meet a philosopher who has a stance which does not share our values, then we can show her that there are viable alternative stances by explaining the virtues of certain values which she does not hold. If we can show our opponent that our values are values worth having, and she adopts those values, then we can make our stance (which was before a seemingly *dead option*) into a *live option*.

A parallel to this method can be seen in how we present the importance of a philosophical discipline, or even philosophy as a discipline, to someone who is unfamiliar with it. In active philosophical engagement we participate in a dialogue where we present

arguments defending our view on any number of issues which are philosophically relevant to us. However, in defending and justifying the importance, the value, of philosophical issues themselves we do more than just present arguments for our philosophical positions. In order to be in the position to receive an argument, and assess its coherence, we need to understand the relevance and the philosophical context in which that argument is taking place. We need to understand such things as what the philosophical issue at hand is, and the background opinions that are behind that theory. In addition, in order to be swayed by an argument, or have an opinion on it, or to even see its worth, we need to see its relevance, and why it is of value. Individual philosophers generally have a specific area, or select areas, that they engage in philosophically. They engage in the types of philosophies that they do because those areas of inquiry appeal to them, and they feel that investigations into those particular areas of inquiry are of value.¹⁴ When introducing a particular discipline of philosophy to someone outside of the philosophical community, we at times are pressed to justify not only our philosophical pursuits, but the pursuit of philosophy in general, and as philosophers we are tasked with explaining the value of such an endeavour. If we couldn't philosophy departments would not get any funding. How we justify our discipline(s) is by showing the worth and value of the discipline - by showing that there is virtue to be had in our specific areas of interest, and in our philosophical pursuit. In doing so we show the relevance of our discipline as a whole and the respective pursuits we engage in. When introducing our disciplines to people who are outside of the philosophical community, and who may be ignorant to the issues we are addressing, we often have to point out aspects of the human

¹⁴ I want to reiterate that I do not see this appeal as a mere preference, the types of philosophy we engage in is important and valuable to us, and is not arbitrary.

condition they have not considered, and in presenting and explaining our views we open new vistas of how the world is or could be like.

An example in philosophy is introducing the existential concept of absurdity. I think it is safe to say that the vast majority of people either think that their life has meaning, or are oblivious to the concerns that it could be meaningless. The realization that life has no objective meaning *is* a different way to view the human condition. This way of viewing our human condition is often most realized through moments of existential crisis, but it can also be explained philosophically, for example in such texts as Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*,¹⁵ or in Tolstoy's "My Confession"¹⁶. In many cases, the introduction of a philosophical concept *is* the introduction of a new aspect of the human condition, and *is* a vista for how the world could be. Van Fraassen's proposed means for conversion, which I feel can breathe life into seemingly *dead options*, is something that we already do in philosophy, and it is philosophically legitimate.

But how does all of this tie into engaging in philosophical critiques? Showing possibilities of human experience and opening new vistas of how the world is or could be is not a critique; but the role these methods can play in our philosophical discourse is a means to show our opponents that our values are values worth having. If we can show our opponent's that there are certain values which are worth having in regards to their epistemic inquiry, then we can adopt van Fraassen's first solution for debate at the level of values. If we meet a philosopher who has a stance which does not share our values, we can show them that there are viable alternative stances. By explaining the virtues of

¹⁵ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Ustin O'Brien. New York: Vintage International, 1955.

¹⁶ Tolstoy, Leo. "My Confession." *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*. 3rd ed. Ed. E.D. Klemke, Steven M. Cahn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

certain values which they do not hold we can show the relevance of our stance and its value in our epistemic lives. If we can show our opponent that our values are values worth having, and they adopt those values, then we can make our stance which was before a seemingly *dead option* into a *live option*. When a stance becomes *live option* then we can begin to engage in a constructive philosophical dispute over values, and we are in a position to adopt such strategies for constructive philosophical engagement and dispute as have been put forward by van Fraassen, and Chakravartty. If, through revealing new ways to view the human condition and opening new vistas for what the world is or could be like, we can convince our opponent that our values are values worth having, and we can get them to endorse those values. We can then offer a critique of our opponent's view by showing that these values are not involved in their current stance, or that these values are in conflict with other values, attitudes, and commitments in the stance they currently hold, and show that this leads to incoherence.

A response to my proposal is to ask, what if our opponent's stance is rationally permissible, and despite our efforts they still do not share our values? If we cannot come to a consensus on which stance is *the* right stance, what does this mean for the future of philosophy and our ability to make progress? These are the closing concerns voiced by Ho, who is worried about philosophy maintaining its reason for existence, finding out *the* way the world is, if we cannot ever reach a consensus; however, we still have further options for engaging in philosophical discourse and dispute, and we can still make philosophical progress despite a lack of consensus. If our stances are *rationally permissible* and we find that we cannot engage in any further discourse with regards to the consistency of our stances, we can nevertheless look to the beliefs which are

generated by our stances. In Chakravartty's 2011 paper¹⁷ he discusses how we can embrace the relativism between stances, and still achieve *philosophical progress*.

2.4 Philosophical Progress at the Level of Stances.

Within *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen mentions that he does not see that a lack of consensus between stances is a serious problem. He remarks that this concern about agreement in philosophy is somewhat ironic given that settling philosophical disputes has never been an easy matter (2002, p. 62). Indeed it is a salient criticism of philosophy as a discipline that, unlike science, philosophy is not a practice which admits progress. This claim Chakravartty feels is misguided, as we are not considering the varying connotations of 'progress' which are relevant to philosophy. He argues that philosophy admits a different kind of progress than the sciences, and that we can see that discourse between stances admits philosophical progress. Recall that in his 2004 paper Chakravartty concludes by asserting that even if it turns out that our opposing views are *rationaly permissible* this is not so bad. In Chakravartty's 2011 paper he seems to have elaborated on this point, and argues that worries over the ability for stances to progress given their relativistic nature stem from a conflation between stances and beliefs. He argues that we *can* and *do* make philosophical progress at the level of stances.

The term 'progress' has two connotations in the philosophy of science generally: *progress-from*, and *progress-towards*. The former connotation deals with the notion of progress in the sense of developmental gains, of leaving one thing for another, and moving forward. The latter connotation deals with the notion of looking at progress in the sense of a positively directed development, of advancement to a better state or condition

¹⁷ Chakravartty, Anjan. "A Puzzle about Voluntarism About Rational Epistemic Stances." *Synthese*. 178 (2011): 37-48.

(Chakravartty 2011, p. 44). Chakravartty makes clear that there is generally not a solid consensus on which connotation is applied to the sciences, depending on what philosopher of science you ask it may be one, or the other, or both potentially. There is, however, a consensus that the sciences are marked by progress, in one form or another. Chakravartty submits that skepticism regarding philosophical progress comes from a conflation between stances (which play a role in generating beliefs), and the beliefs themselves (2011, p. 44). He remarks that we do not see *progress-from* when we look at philosophical stances throughout history, and given the relativistic nature of stances this is to be expected. He asserts that as long as stances are considered rationally permissible we are likely to see them perpetuated. At the level of stances then, we will not see progress in philosophy as a movement from one stance to the next (we will not see *progress-from*), and we should not expect to see one stance win out over all others (2011, pp. 44-45). So he concedes that we will not see the kind of progress generally found in science if we endorse philosophical positions as stances - we will not arrive at a unanimous stance by leaving behind opposing philosophical positions; however, this does not mean that we do not make progress in philosophy.

Stances are not identifiable with beliefs, rather stances generate beliefs, and so we cannot conflate stances with beliefs. Recall that in van Fraassen's characterization of a stance he asserts that a stance is not limited to the beliefs which are held at any given time. It is in light of this division between stances and their corresponding beliefs that we can see how philosophy progresses at the level of stances, despite the possibility that there are rationally permissible stances which are mutually exclusive. Chakravartty asserts that we can clearly see evidence of *progress-towards*, and even in some cases

evidence of *progress-from*, in regard to the beliefs which have been generated by our respective stances. He asserts that “we have learned, for example, that certain philosophical views are problematic, and that others are promising. These are positive results, and this is precisely the sort of progress made by philosophy *within* the context of a stance” (2011, p. 45). He points out a salient division between philosophy and science is that the sciences are largely consensus driven. In the scientific community there is generally a consensus on what issues are of importance, what methods and technologies are most effective in our scientific inquiries, etc. This general attitude of consensus in the sciences is one of the hallmarks of its progress. This general attitude of consensus, however, is not shared in philosophy, and this is one of the main reasons that critics outside the philosophical community often reject the idea that philosophy is a discipline that admits of progress. Chakravartty remarks that unlike scientists, who are generally unified in a consensus about certain prevalent scientific views, philosophers are “an unruly mob.” In the philosophical community all of the rationally permissible stances that we have developed are under investigation all the time (Chakravartty 2011, p. 45).

This assessment by Chakravartty of the type of progress which philosophy yields is apt. We can see the division between the type of progress philosophy yields and the type of progress science yields just by looking at how these disciplines are generally taught. In the sciences we are not taught a history of scientific theories. We are taught the accepted theories which have won out over the others. For example we are not taught the theories surrounding phlogiston; we are taught theories surrounding oxidation. We point to our now rejected theories in the sciences as a demonstration of the kind of progress which we have made, but we do not give those theories the same respect that we give our

current accepted theories, and we do not spend much, if any time, teaching these theories. In philosophy, however, we are presented with a historical dialogue of opposing views on a range of different philosophical topics. We are often presented with a philosophical issue, or area of inquiry, and then we are shown the varying views which have been offered regarding the relevant issue. We are situated in a dialogue between various legitimate opposing views, and we are often asked to take our stand on a particular issue in light of these considerations; however, through all of this *we are not taught to believe - we are taught to question*. As Chakravartty has said, all of our permissible philosophical positions are up for debate all the time. This distinctive element of our philosophical education shows that philosophy is not a discipline which appeals to – or aims at – consensus. What this element of philosophy shows is that we are never restricted by consensus and authority; we are taught to analyze and question even the most successful of philosophical positions.

Just because philosophy is not a consensus-driven enterprise does not mean that philosophy is not an enterprise which makes progress. Philosophical progress is of a different kind than scientific progress. Moreover, we can still make progress even in light of the relativistic nature of stances; the progress which is made in the realm of amending the beliefs which our stances generate is the hallmark of philosophical success at the level of stances. So it would seem that in the face of critics such as Ho who are concerned about philosophy being a pursuit of *the way the world is*, we should respond that this is a misguided conceptualization of the success of philosophy, and what we philosophers consider progress. I reject Ho's conception of what the goal of philosophy is. It seems that Ho has taken the hallmark of success in the sciences and has applied that same

hallmark to philosophy, asserting that both disciplines hold a similar goal and that progress will be gauged by similar standards. To echo van Fraassen - agreement in philosophy has never been easy, and I assert that if the pursuit of philosophy is to uncover *the way* that the world is, all of our philosophical discourse in the greater part of the last 3,000 years has failed us in accomplishing that end. But, as Chakravartty has explained, philosophy and science are not disciplines with a similar concept of progress. In light of this distinction we can see that the concerns which have been put forward regarding the successful progress of philosophy are misguided, as they are applying a scientific hallmark of successful progress to philosophy, a discipline with its own standards of progress and hallmarks of success which do not appeal to consensus.

2.5 Concluding Remarks Regarding Stances and the Problem of Relativism.

Ho has asserted that philosophy's reason for existence is the pursuit of finding out *the way* that the world is. This assertion by Ho is contentious. Is our goal in philosophy to find out one way that the world really is? Are we to mark progress in philosophy as having made it one step further to that goal? I personally do not think so, and as I have mentioned philosophy has failed to make much headway in this project; furthermore, this is a goal which van Fraassen has explicitly rejected in endorsing stances and epistemic voluntarism. In his concern over the goal of philosophy, there is something crucial to the proposal of endorsing stances which Ho has overlooked - the rejection of writing theories which make claims to depicting *the way* that the world is. This goal, van Fraassen feels, is not tenable - it disregards the tumultuous nature of our epistemic lives. Perhaps the most salient concern within *The Empirical Stance* is the issue of dealing with conceptual and scientific revolutions. A theory writing project which strives to assert *the way* that

the world is cannot cope with radical conceptual and scientific revolutions; it will always be open to the lingering concern over whether or not we are on the verge of another conceptual revolution. To deny that we could be mistaken about our proposed theory given the history of science and philosophy and the recurrence of conceptual revolutions is naïve. To admit that our current theory may be mistaken is to endorse a fallibilist view, but this compromises our ability to establish *the way the world is*, as it admits that there could be a different way. Van Fraassen is not striving to develop an epistemology which embarks on developing a factual theory of how the world is. The goal of his voluntarist epistemology is to develop strategies and tactics which are appropriate to certain criteria of investigation, and develop an epistemology which takes into account the subjective values at work in our epistemic life. So the concern that we must give up our pursuit of finding *the way that the world is*, is not a concern that van Fraassen holds. Indeed it seems that he feels that this proposed *telos* of philosophy is untenable and is one which we should reject. Van Fraassen submits that we can embrace a philosophical project with new hopes and new dreams. He is proposing a new possibility for how to do philosophy given our human condition, and our tumultuous epistemic life, and he is trying to open new vistas of how we can engage in philosophy. He recognizes how we have traditionally engaged in our epistemologies and asserts that it does not have to be this way.

Endorsing voluntarism and stances is a way to reimagine ourselves, and takes into account the subjective values and judgments which are part of our epistemic life and our epistemologies. It is the call to recognize these subjective elements which make up our philosophical positions, and which in turn have led to the charges that stances are problematically relative; however, as has been shown in the foregoing discussion,

stances, despite being relative, are not problematic, and we can engage in constructive philosophical discourse over stances and the beliefs which they generate. We *can* engage in philosophical dispute about stances, and offer critiques even though we are disagreeing about values. As has been pointed out by van Fraassen and Chakravartty, we can go about this is by showing that our opponent's web of values, attitudes and commitments which make up her stance result in an incoherent view, and we can try to demonstrate that her stance is rationally impermissible. Furthermore, we can try to convince our opponent to change their stance by showing them that the values they explicitly or implicitly endorse are included in our view, and that our view is internally coherent. If our opponent does not share our values, and their view is internally coherent, then we still have legitimate philosophical means to engage in discourse and try and get them to change their stance. We can as Chakravartty submits, critically examine the beliefs which are generated by our opponent's stance. We can also, as van Fraassen proposes, reveal new possibilities in the human condition, and open new vistas for how the world is or could be like. The concerns over relativism in stances have been shown to be misguided. We can engage in disputes about subjective values, attitudes, and commitments, and we can find philosophically legitimate ways to convince our opponent's to change their stance, and we need not despair about the future of philosophy and our ability to make progress.

For stance empiricism this means as empiricists we can still maintain the tradition of rebellion against metaphysics, and offer legitimate philosophical critiques, even though we are disagreeing about values, attitudes and commitments that our opponent takes or adopts in their investigative strategies. So, we can still maintain as part of the

empirical stance the first two *characteristics of empiricism* (a) a rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and b) a strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) that proceed by postulation (van Fraassen 2002, p.37)) which are found saliently throughout the perennial tradition of empiricism. However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, through all of the foregoing considerations we have not been offered a positive characterization of what a stance, and specifically, the empirical stance is or entails.

Chapter 3. *Experience* – More Than Meets the Eye.

Van Fraassen has suggested that empiricists throughout history are united in that they share certain attitudes, commitments, an approach - the empirical stance. But, as I have asserted, what stance empiricism involves or entails in terms of its positive elements is not altogether clear. In Chapter One I concluded by addressing a single positive attitude which van Fraassen has asserted is that one of the most central attitudes to empiricism is that science is seen as a “paradigm of rational inquiry” (2002, p. 63). In trying to capture empiricism as a stance, a corresponding commitment empiricists would hold is commitment to this type of inquiry. This I submit is the clearest characterization of the attitude – the spirit – of empiricism that has been provided, or that can be seen from the brief sketch provided by van Fraassen. But a problem immediately emerges with this characterization: the method of inquiry in the sciences which empiricists are seemingly so sanguine about is empirical inquiry, and we cannot just say that the empirical stance is a commitment to the empirical - this is clearly circular, and is not insightful without an understanding of what we mean by the *empirical* in empiricism. So, the next task is to understand what is meant by the concept of the *empirical* and an intimately related matter what is meant by the concept of *experience*.

The etymology of the term *empirical* comes from the Latin *empiricus* – a physician guided by experience; which comes from the Greek *empeirikos* (“experienced”), from *empeiria* (“experience”). Traditionally in empiricism *experience* has been held to be sense perception, or what is observable. So when it is asserted that knowledge comes from experience, what is being asserted is that knowledge has its root

in our ability to perceive, or observe, an objects or event through our senses. In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen argues that such characterizations are naïve, as there is more involved in *experience* than merely events which we observe.

In this chapter, I will begin by offering a brief discussion of the history of empiricism focusing on the most prominent theories that have been established within that tradition. This will shed light on what has been commonly held to be experience, and on what the positive projects of empiricism have classically been. I will begin by discussing the three most prominent Modern British Empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, by offering a sketch of their respective theories. I will then go on to discuss the 20th Century movement of Logical Positivism. Positivism is a wide ranging movement, with different schools of philosophy, and different philosophers (many of whom endorsed different theories over the course of their careers) making the movement difficult to characterize or sum up in terms of the views of any particular positivist doctrine. For the purposes of this Chapter, I will be focussing primarily on the theory/observation dichotomy in positivism and what has been referred to as *the received view*. Next I will discuss van Fraassen's disambiguation of the theory/observation dichotomy, which he asserts as part of his *constructive empiricism* developed in *The Scientific Image*. In the *Scientific Image* van Fraassen gives us a rather clear characterization of what counts as observable in empiricism – what is meant by “experience;” but in *The Empirical Stance* this previous characterization is left behind, and we are cautioned against naiveté about experience. I will conclude by suggesting that Van Fraassen's conception of experience ultimately does little to help us better understand what stance empiricism is or entails.

3.1 *Experience in the History of Empiricism.*

3.1.1 The British Empiricists.

Let us suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any ideas; How comes it to be furnished? ...Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self. (Locke, p. 104)

In the Western Philosophical Tradition, when we think of empiricism the three most prominent philosophers who generally come to mind are the Modern British Empiricists: John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. These three philosophers endorsed the general thesis of *the theory of ideas*¹⁸ – that the mind has direct access only to its ideas, and that we never directly perceive the physical world. Although the respective theories of these philosophers have their own subtleties and differences, their general philosophical position of these three philosophers can be broadly construed as the thesis that all that the mind ever has access to are ideas, and these ideas are furnished through experience, experience of either sense perception, or experience of operations of the mind such as *reflection* (or *imagination*). The British Empiricists vehemently rejected the theory that our minds are furnished with *innate ideas* which are found in the mind *a priori*, and the theories of the three British Empiricists differ in their attempts to explain how, without any innate or *a priori* ideas, the mind comes to be furnished with all of the thoughts and knowledge it possesses.

3.1.1.1 Locke.

Locke develops his epistemological theory in *An Essay on Human Understanding*. He begins by attacking the notion that we are born with *innate ideas* and develops a theory that argues that all of our knowledge is founded on, or derived from experience (p. 104), and that we can establish certainty about the external world's existence through this

¹⁸ The *theory of ideas* is itself not a strictly empiricist thesis. It was developed by Descartes, and was endorsed by rationalists and empiricists in the Modern Period.

means. *Ideas* are understood as whatever the mind perceives *in itself* – they are the *immediate* objects of all perception, thought, or understanding. According to Locke our *ideas* result from our experiences of either *sensation* or *reflection*. The ideas of *sensation* are our ideas of sensible qualities: cold, heat, red, soft, etc. The ideas of *reflection* are perceptions of the operations of our own mind: reasoning, willing, doubting, believing, etc. *Sensation* and *reflection* are the foundations from which “experience furnishes our understanding” (Locke, p. 105), and all ideas and knowledge can be derived from these faculties of the mind.

In *Book Two* of the *Essay* Locke goes on to further elaborate on the *ideas* of *sensation*. It is in this discussion that he develops his notion of *primary* and *secondary qualities* and establishes his theory of *Indirect Realism* regarding our knowledge of the external world’s existence. *Qualities* are explained as the *powers* that a thing has to produce *ideas* in us. *Primary qualities* are those which are inseparable from a body – those without which a body would cease to exist. These are qualities such as solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number (Locke, pp. 134-135). *Secondary qualities* are in objects themselves only *qua* powers to produce sensations in us by means of an object’s *primary qualities*. These *secondary qualities* correspond to the sensible qualities of an object, so in the case of a snowball, cold, white, etc. The sensations of cold, white, etc., are not in the objects which we perceive, but are *ideas* which are excited in us by the *primary qualities* of an object. If we strip these sensible qualities from an object all that remain of that object are its *primary qualities*. *Secondary qualities* exist in objects as the power to produce *ideas* in us, and there is nothing like the *idea* of these qualities in the objects themselves. For example, when someone observes our snow ball the *idea* he or

she has of the colour will be variant under different lighting conditions, similarly if he or she first holds their left hand in ice water, and their right hand in warm water, then the snow ball may feel colder in the right hand than in the left. The *secondary qualities* exist in the object as the power to produce *ideas* in us, but these ideas vary while the object remains the same; hence, it is concluded, that the ideas which correspond to these *qualities* do not resemble their respective objects and that there is nothing like our *ideas* of coldness, or whiteness that exist in the objects themselves. Sensations are excited in us by objects and it is through the sensations which we receive that we have knowledge that the external world exists.

Locke argues that the *secondary qualities* which excite *ideas* in our mind through sensation cannot subsist on their own, and as a result we suppose that there must be some sort of substratum from which these *qualities* originate, this substratum we call substance (p. 295). This underlying substratum, however, we have no clear and distinct *idea* of, as it is what underlies that which has the power to produce *ideas* in us. It is something “I know not what” which excites the *ideas* that we have in our minds; seemingly by accident as we have no control over the *ideas* we receive from objects. For example, when I open my eyes and gaze at freshly falling snow I cannot help but have the corresponding idea of whiteness, this perception being out of my control, and Locke infers that it must result from the substance itself not from me. So, when it comes to *secondary qualities*, we have an *indirect* knowledge of the world’s existence, inferred from the *ideas* which are excited in us by objects we observe through sense perception. When it comes to *primary qualities*, we see a copy of the actual *qualities* themselves, which represent them by virtue of their resemblance to them. For example when we see a rectangular figure, we

have a rectangular idea which resembles this objects *primary quality* of figure. But what this substance *is*, however, we cannot know (Locke, p. 305). Locke feels that *substance* is needed in order for us to be able to explain various aspects of our experience; however, here we can see an element of Locke's philosophy which deviates from a hard empiricist thesis, as he postulates an aspect of reality which is not given to us through experience – substance. This conclusion will be seen as problematic by Berkeley and is rejected in his theory of *Idealism*.

In light of van Fraassen's analysis of empiricism it does not seem like Locke is a very good empiricist, as he does not abide by the first two *characteristics of empiricism* put forward by van Fraassen.¹⁹ In Locke we see that he has a demand for further explanation which leads to a postulated aspect of reality which is not given in experience – material substance. So as it turns out Locke's philosophy incorporates certain elements which are rather un-empirical. D.W. Hamlyn has asserted that the postulates found in Locke's philosophy show that Locke was an empiricist in a rather limited sense (Hamlyn, p. 502). As mentioned above, Locke's theory of *indirect realism* lacks a hard empiricist edge as we have no *idea of substance* given through sense experience; rather, it is a postulated aspect of reality. A further element of his philosophy which can be seen as un-empirical can be found in *Book Four* of the *Essay* where Locke argues that our knowledge of God is made clear through reason – through *demonstrable* knowledge (pp. 619-630). The *demonstrative* knowledge we have of God, however, is seemingly *a priori* in that it is yielded through reason. So here we see a further deviation away from what may be considered a hardline empiricist thesis that all knowledge is attained through

¹⁹ We can also see he does not abide by the *third characteristic* either given his rejection of the theory of *innate ideas* found in *Book One* of the *Essay*.

experience, as it seems according to Locke that we have at least some knowledge which we gain through *a priori* means: knowledge of God through demonstrable reason, and knowledge of substance via inference to the best explanation.

3.1.1.2 Berkeley.

Berkeley has a more radical empiricist theory than Locke, and attempts to weed out the elements of Locke's theory that, as he saw it, were inconsistent with *empiricism* – in particular the postulation of material substance. In doing so he develops an ontological theory which allows for direct knowledge of the external world – Berkeleyan *Idealism*. *Idealism* is argued for in two of Berkeley's works originally in *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature* (1710), and again in his later work *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). Berkeley begins at a similar point to Locke's assertion that if we take a catalogue of human knowledge we will find that our mind has access only to *ideas*. Either *ideas* which have been imprinted on the mind through experience (through sense perception), perceived through our passions and the operations of the mind (for example emotions), or perceived through the process of our memory and imagination (where we can alter our previous perceptions into seemingly new ones). So, it is through various distinct sensory impressions that we experience an external object, and through this means we are furnished with *ideas*, and can acquire knowledge of these objects in the world. Berkeley's problem with Locke's *indirect realism* is that it involves postulates not given in experience, and results in skepticism. Recall that Locke asserts that our *ideas* do not resemble the *secondary qualities* in objects. Berkeley sees this as resulting in skepticism, because on this view we do not know how accurately our *ideas* represent the world; therefore, *indirect realism* results in skepticism regarding knowledge of the external world.

Berkeley argues, however, that we do have direct access to the world, because an object *is* nothing more than a collection of *ideas* perceived in the mind. A mind does not correspond to any particular *idea*, but rather is that which perceives all of our *ideas*. To perceive the sensation white is to perceive the *idea* of white. To perceive a snowball is to perceive a collection of distinct *simple ideas* (colour, texture, temperature, etc.) amalgamated in the *complex idea* of a snowball. The snowball is nothing beyond this *complex idea*, and the *idea* subsists in the mind perceiving it - there is nothing underlying the object like *material substance*. When we perceive an object, our snowball, we perceive that object directly as an *idea*. The *idea* does not represent the snow ball - it *is* the snowball. According to Berkeley for an idea to exist is for it to be perceived (1982, p. 24), an ideas *esse is percipi*. If all of the perceivable *ideas* were stripped away from an object, it would be annihilated from existence; for example, if the snowball were to lose its colour, texture, temperature, shape, etc. there would no longer be a snowball - it would cease to exist. Just in the same way as a thought cannot exist without a mind thinking it, an *idea* cannot exist without a mind perceiving it. He asserts that the existence of an *idea* depends on that *idea* being perceived (1982, p. 23). He finds it as intuitive that, when we talk of things existing we talk of our being able to perceive the *idea* of that thing. Berkeley takes it as absurd and a contradiction that an object can have a real existence beyond being perceived by a mind. He feels this is an absurd proposition because if anyone were to investigate their own mind they will find that objects in the world are nothing but that which we perceive through our senses, and what we perceive are *ideas* (1982, p. 24). Issues of consistency in nature (what happens to the existence of objects when no one is perceiving them), and our inability to alter *ideas* received through

sensation, are reconciled by asserting that God's mind perceives all things; he is omnipresent, omnipotent, and it is God's mind wherein all *ideas* ultimately subsist. That is why when I open my eyes I cannot help but have the *idea* of white when I see snow, and moreover when I turn my back on an object, and I am no longer thinking about it, it still exists – God's mind perceives all things (Berkeley 1982, p. 34-35). This is how Berkeley resolves the problem of skepticism – by asserting that there is no material substance, and that the only things that exist are minds, and the *ideas* they perceive, which in turn subsist in the mind of God.

As was previously mentioned Berkeley strives to weed out the elements of Locke's theory which are not in line with experience, namely his postulated material substance. However Berkeley's philosophy still incorporates certain postulated entities which are not given in experience – mind's, both our own and God's. God's existence is, similarly to Locke, derived by Berkeley via reasoning; furthermore, the mind is also an entity or aspect of reality not given in experience, but is known, says Berkeley, intuitively. So, even with Berkeley we see certain non-empirical elements involved in his theory. These elements are further weeded out by Hume.

3.1.1.3 Hume.

Hume's empiricism is heavily influenced by the developments taking place in his day in natural philosophy, and is inspired by the philosophical innovations made by Bacon and Newton, as well as advances in scientific method. Newton, in his *Method of Natural Philosophy*, develops a methodological system that is in vehement rejection of the Cartesian Method of *a priori* deductive proofs. Newton develops four rules of

philosophizing in natural philosophy, followed by a subsequent denial of the legitimacy of hypotheses. His fourth rule of philosophizing directly rejects *a priori* theorizing.

In experimental philosophy we are to look upon propositions inferred by general induction from phenomena as accurately or very nearly true, notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses that may be imagined, till such a time as other phenomena occur by which they may either be made more accurate if liable to exceptions. (Newton, p. 5)

This rule is subsequently followed by a critique of inferences made on the basis of hypotheses that are not validated through experience.²⁰ Newton asserts that nothing of certainty can be established on mere conjectures (pp. 5-6). In this tradition Hume professes that a “science of man” should be founded on observation and experiment, that we cannot go beyond experience, and that any hypotheses making assertions beyond experience should be rejected (1978, pp. xvi-xvii). It is in proceeding in this “experimental method” that Hume establishes his epistemological theory regarding the human mind.

Hume, similarly to his predecessors (Locke, and Berkeley), begins with a denial of *innate ideas*; however, his theory is better defined when it comes to cataloguing the materials of knowledge. Similarly to his predecessors, Hume divides the perceptions of the mind into two categories, *impressions* and *ideas* (1978, p. 1). *Impressions* are the lively perceptions which precede *ideas* in the mind, and are yielded by the senses, and through reflection. *Ideas* are further divided into *simple* and *complex ideas* (in the same way as Berkeley). Hume’s philosophical project is to investigate the human understanding given that all we have access to are *impressions* and their corresponding *ideas* excited in us. The result of Hume’s investigation, however, is skepticism – as it

²⁰ Hypotheses, of course, do have their place in the Newtonian Method. Hypotheses are to be applied only in the explanation of the properties of things which are observed, and not in determining said properties. Moreover, hypotheses have their place in helping scientists to construct new experiments.

turns out many of our *ideas* are not derivable from experience; rather they are concocted by the imagination, using the materials of the *simple ideas* which we do perceive. Among such concoctions (or fictions) are ideas, like space, time, the supposed necessary connection found in cause and effect relations, and personal identity.²¹ These concepts are made from the collection of perceptions and *ideas* in our mind which we have formed into these *complex ideas*, but none of these concepts are ever directly experienced as entities in the world. This leads Hume to conclude that these ideas are fictions, with no basis in reality, that is, Humean skepticism.

Of the three most prominent British Empiricists, Hume is most in line with van Fraassen's *characteristics of empiricism*. Furthermore, Hume also shares most prominently the attitude that science is an exemplar of rational inquiry, which, recall, van Fraassen holds as one of empiricisms main positive attitudes. The developments in science in the modern period are also influential to Locke and Berkeley. Locke's epistemology in particular is heavily influenced by the theory of corpuscles.²² However, it is in Hume that we see an explicit endorsement of using scientific methodology in our epistemology, and indeed in other areas of philosophy as well. Hume is really what might be called 'an empiricist's empiricist,' and develops a theory which leaves no room for *innate ideas* or other elements or aspects of reality which are not given in experience. The final result in taking this foundational empiricist thesis to its ultimate conclusion, however, is skepticism.

²¹ Hume's denial that we have empirical evidence of the mind's existence is one of the main concepts which separate him from Berkeley. For Berkeley what exists are *ideas* and the Minds that perceive them. For Hume the mind itself is nothing but a collection of perceived ideas, so we see are given an even more radical empiricist thesis from Hume than we get from Berkeley.

²² The scientific theory that the sensible bodies of the material world are composed of bodies too small to be seen – an early version of the atomic theory.

3.1.1.4 Observations Drawn From Modern Empiricism.

Looking at the British Empiricists we can observe explicitly the expression of the classical empiricist thesis that all knowledge comes from experience. Experience is the foundation for knowledge, as it furnishes the mind with *ideas*. In the theories of each philosopher we see an attempt to further refine this thesis by weeding out elements which were inconsistent with the thesis. Experience as generally conceived by the British Empiricists involves two elements: experience of *ideas* perceived through the senses, and *ideas* perceived through reflection (the inner workings of our mind). In either case our ideas do not exist in the mind innately, but are furnished through experience. Our knowledge regarding the external world is yielded through our sensory perceptions. So, for the British Empiricists, when it comes to the external world, direct sensory perception, the having of sensory (*impressions* and) *ideas*, is what constitutes experience.

3.1.2 Logical Positivism.²³

Logical positivism was a philosophical movement that developed in the early half of the 20th Century beginning in approximately 1920. This school of philosophy had many different philosophers with a range of differing theories and views, making a clear characterization of what logical positivism is or entails difficult. The lack of a univocal positivist thesis adds further weight to van Fraassen's argument that there is not a unifying empiricist thesis. The positivists who donned the mantle of empiricism in the early 20th century did not *all* share a single unifying thesis, and as individuals many did not endorse a cohesive thesis throughout their particular careers (Creath, "Logical Empiricism"). Given the wide range of philosophers and theories which are involved in

²³ Logical positivism is known under a variation of terms as logical empiricism or neo-positivism. The differences between them are subtle, and indeed logical empiricism is often considered the wider ranging movement which would include logical positivism. For the purposes of the conversation at hand I will refer to the movement generally as logical positivism, or simply positivism, for ease of discussion.

the movement of Logical Positivism, I will not be focussing on any specific theories, but will focus on the observational/theoretical distinction held within the movement, and a discussion of what came to be known as *the received view*, since this element of the positivist movement is the clearest indication of what positivists, generally, held experience to be – and experience is of central importance to empiricism generally speaking.

Positivists in the early 20th century set out to rid science of speculative metaphysics, and to objectively distinguish hard science from pseudoscience. Knowledge came from two sources according to the positivists - from either formal logical deductions from definitions as in mathematics, or from observational and experimental reports. Any claim to knowledge that went beyond these limits was essentially meaningless. The positivists philosophical project was to develop a principle of meaningfulness that required scientifically legitimate statements to have a specified relation to actual and possible empirical evidence (Rosenberg, p. 12). If scientific statements cannot be actually, or possibly, tested empirically, that is, through observation and experiment, the statements were considered to lack any real scientific significance, because they cannot be verified as true or false (or else were really just analytic claims, matters of definition, such as the claim “Whales are mammals,” that make not claims about the empirical world). This is roughly what is considered *the received view* in positivism.

Two of the main inspirations for *the received view* are Ernst Mach and Henri Poincare. Mach asserted a criterion for meaningfulness for theoretical concepts in science: scientific statements were to be verifiable empirically (Suppe, p.18). Mach’s

criterion for knowledge, however, did not make room for mathematics. This was seen as a problem by the positivists because our scientific theories, most notably Physics, characterize observable regularities in mathematical and *theoretical terms*. So, the positivists established a somewhat weaker criterion for meaningfulness which also held mathematical statements (formal deductions from logical and mathematical definitions (Rosenberg, p. 12)) as meaningful. Mathematics was introduced into the criteria of meaningfulness by way of Poincare's observation that scientific laws are nothing more than conventions about facts of science (Suppe, p. 19). Adopting this concept from Poincare, the positivists established that theoretical terms in science were merely a convention, or an agreement in how we talk about observable phenomena. Taking this distinction into account we could potentially redefine all theoretical terms in phenomenal language – in terms of what is observable. The positivists argued that theoretical terms were meaningful only if they corresponded to phenomenal descriptions in observational terms.

'Observable,' however, is a vague term, and what was to count as an observation term was a matter of some dispute between varying positivists. Certain members of the Vienna Circle advocated an understanding of observation language in terms of sense-datum language, where *sense-data* are understood as things like colours, sounds, smells, texture, etc. (similar to *ideas* for the British Empiricists). On this view of observables the phenomenal descriptions of sense-data are known to be true in virtue of one's sensory experience (Suppe, p. 22). The more widely held proposal for verifying observation terms was a "physicalist language," where we talk about "material things and ascribe observable properties to them" (Suppe, p. 22). Observation terms on this view refer to

material things with observable properties. The distinction between the observable and the non-observable, however, is not all together clear, a critique raised by Grover Maxwell in his 1962 paper “The Ontological Status of Theoretical Entities.”

3.1.2.1 A Problem with Understanding the Observable.

Maxwell argues that the distinction between theoretical entities and observable entities is not clear, and any line that can be drawn will be relative to our current theory and the instruments we have at our disposal (p. 38). He has two main arguments. The first is that we cannot draw a line between the observable and the unobservable, as this is relative and changes as we develop better instruments. His second argument dismisses the importance of such a distinction. He argues that ‘observable’ is a term which changes given our scientific problems; moreover, what counts as ‘observable’ changes as we develop more precise instruments. For example, as we have developed microscopes organisms like viruses, previously non-observable entities, are now ‘observable.’ Maxwell argues that our inability to draw a clear line between theoretical (the supposed opposite of the observable) and observable entities raises questions about the ontological status of theoretical entities. He asserts that as we develop more precise instruments what was previously an “unobservable” theoretical entity becomes observable.

...there is, in principle, a continuous series beginning with looking through a vacuum and containing these members: looking through a windowpane, looking through glasses, looking through binoculars, looking through a low powered microscope, looking through a high-power microscope, etc., in the order given. The important consequence is that, so far, we are left without criteria which would enable us to draw a non-arbitrary line between “observation” and “theory.” (Maxwell, p. 33).

Maxwell does recognize that philosophers do try to establish distinctions between theoretical and observable entities. Philosophers may submit that “unobservable” entities are those which you *in principle* cannot observe. “In principle” here is taken to mean that the entities cannot be observed given our physiological theory of human perception;

however, this raises questions of what “in principle” we can/could observe. Maxwell responds by asserting it is logically possible that we could develop physiologically, hence that we could mutate and acquire new abilities of perception (p. 35). Given the generally enormous range of logical possibility, we can see how difficult it would be to once-and-for-all clearly establish what is *in principle* observable.

The positivists’ epistemology focussed on analyzing the scientific methodology and the entities or aspects of the world we postulate as part of our theories. The positivist commitment to the empirical is found in their view that theoretical terms were meaningful only if they corresponded to observable terms. However, as Maxwell points out, what counts as ‘observable’ is not clear, and what was once a theoretical entity has, or could, become observable with the proper instruments, or with biological adaptation. In *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen strives to mark a distinction between the unobservable from the observable as part of his theory of *constructive empiricism*.

3.1.3 Constructive Empiricism.

In *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen submits a new way to view science and its goals. He argues for an empiricist alternative to both scientific realism and logical positivism – an alternative he calls *constructive empiricism*. Constructive empiricism is a scientific anti-realist position which advocates the view that “*Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a theory involves a belief only that it is empirically adequate*” (1980, p. 12). In *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen’s conception of the empirical, in line with that taken throughout the history of empiricism, has to do with observation. This is because of the requirement that for a theory to be *empirically adequate* the *empirical substructures* (the candidates for representing observable

phenomena) of our scientific *models*²⁴ (structures which satisfy the axioms of a theory (van Fraassen 1980, pp. 42-43)) must be isomorphic (must be a one-to-one relation) with *appearances*, which are identified as experimental and observational reports. This is a rather sophisticated and difficult formulation, which may elicit the subsequent question: So, what is van Fraassen's conception of observation, and what is held to be observable in *The Scientific Image*?

Van Fraassen rejects the Positivist theory/observation dichotomy, and argues that we can usefully distinguish between observable and un-observable entities, and he goes on to argue against Maxwell's critique that we cannot usefully distinguish between the observable and the unobservable. Van Fraassen begins by pointing out that the theory/observation dichotomy in Positivism is based on a category mistake. He explains that terms and concepts are theoretical or non-theoretical; whereas, entities are observable or unobservable (1980, p. 14). So the proper logical contrast with the observable is not the theoretical; but, rather, the unobservable. Observability is a property of actual things. Two questions then emerge: first, can we divide our language into the theoretical part and the non-theoretical part? Second, can we classify objects and events into observable, and unobservable? In response to the first question, he answers 'no'. Van Fraassen points out that our language is "thoroughly theory-infected," that the language we use colloquially, and in science is influenced and guided by our previously held theories (1980, p. 14). So, we cannot disentangle theoretical terminology from our language in order to leave a non-theoretical core that would be more acceptable to the positivists; however, this does not mean that in using these theoretical terms in our language we believe the theory is true.

²⁴ He clarifies that the use of the term model is taken from logic and meta-mathematics (van Fraassen 1980, p. 44).

For example, colloquially you can say “the sun is rising” even though you do not believe in geocentrism.

In response to the second question – whether we can usefully classify objects and events (processes, properties, etc.) as observable or unobservable - van Fraassen answers ‘yes’. We can distinguish between the observable and the unobservable as long as we have clear cases of what counts as observable, and what counts as unobservable. He begins by making a distinction, which will be relevant to his conception of experience found in *The Empirical Stance*, that we should not “confuse *observing* (an entity, such as a thing, event, or process) with *observing that* (something or other is the case)” (1980, p. 15). To merely *observe* is to simply notice, or perceive, an entity, for example a paint brush; but, to *observe that* it is a paint brush requires the observer to possess the relevant conceptual information to properly interpret what the object they are perceiving *is*. In establishing what we can count as observable and unobservable entities, van Fraassen responds directly to Maxwell’s critique about the arbitrary division between what is an observable entity, and what is a theoretical (an unobservable) entity. Van Fraassen first establishes a rough guide (which is not to be taken as a definition) for what we can take observable to mean:

X is observable if there are circumstances which are such that, if X is present to us under those circumstances, then we observe it. (van Fraassen 1980, p. 16).

He points out that the issue for Maxwell is how we could draw the line between what is observable and what is detectable in a roundabout way (recall Maxwell’s “continuous series” where we have unaided vision at one end and high powered microscopes at the other, and observable becomes a matter of degree). Van Fraassen asserts that we cannot answer this question without some arbitrariness, and points out that the term “observable”

is a vague predicate – but that this is not a problem, since almost all predicates in natural language are vague. A vague predicate is useful, he explains, when we have clear cases and counter cases (van Fraassen 1980, p. 16). An example offered of a clear case is looking at the moons of Jupiter through a telescope. An example of a counter case is detection of micro-particles in a cloud chamber, where it is not possible to see the charged micro-particles traverse the chamber. Only the trail of water droplets that charged particle makes through the vapour is visible – but not the particle itself (van Fraassen 1980, pp. 16-17).

One of Maxwell's central concerns with the theory/observation dichotomy was with understanding what *in principle* could be observed. Recall, Maxwell puts forward that circumstances could change where we can now observe previously unobservable entities. For example, we could evolve the ability to see in ultraviolet and infrared light, or perhaps we could develop technology to shrink ourselves down to the microscopic level where we could see micro-particles. In response to such logical possibilities van Fraassen asserts:

This strikes me as a trick, a change in the subject of discussion. I have a mortar and pestle made of copper and weighing about a kilo. Should I call it breakable because a giant could break it? ...The human organism is, from the point of view of physics, a certain kind of measuring apparatus. As such it has certain limitations... It is these limitations to which the 'able' in 'observable' refers – our limitations *qua* human beings. (van Fraassen 1980, p. 17).

When it comes to establishing what these limitations are he asserts that this is not a subject for philosophical analysis; rather, it is a subject for empirical science “to delineate what is observable we must look to science. ...what is observable [is] a theory-independent question. It is a function of facts about us *qua* organisms...” (van Fraassen 1980, p. 57). So, in *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen's conception of the empirical

seemingly has to do with what is observable to us given our physiology, and here again we see that the empirical has to do with what can be perceived through the senses. So, ultimately, the empirical is the observable. But we must take note of his distinction between *observing* and *observing that*, because as we will see from his conception of experience put forward in *The Empirical Stance* there is more to *experience* than merely *observing* – we have to *observe that*.

3.2 Experience in Stance Empiricism.

In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen asserts a non-foundationalist conception of experience. He submits that one of the main faults of modern empiricism was its “naïve way of basing everything on experience, naively conceived” (2002, p. 118). In his discussion of experience he addresses a critique by Paul Feyerabend against classical empiricism.²⁵ Feyerabend draws on a 17th century Jesuit argument against Protestant fundamentalists dogmatically adhering to scripture as the ultimate authority of information and belief, which has three parts: First, it is not self-evident what is to count as genuine scripture. Second, that the meaning of scripture is not all together clear and requires interpretation. Third, in the attempt to settle whether some beliefs are in accordance with scripture, we need to know how to draw out the implications of scripture (van Fraassen 2002, p. 121). Feyerabend argues that this same argument can be made against the dogma of classical empiricism – the foundationalist position of “*Sola Experientia*: any claim to knowledge, any support for opinion, must come from experience; experience trumps all” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 120). Feyerabend’s argument against the rule of *Sola Experientia* has three parts: first, there is the problem of properly

²⁵ What is put forward in *The Empirical Stance* is the same argument put forward against Feyerabend in van Fraassen’s 1997 paper “*Sola Experientia* – Feyerabend’s Refutation of Classical Empiricism.”

identifying experience, in the requisite sense, from the general sense (because in a way everything that happens to us is experience).²⁶ Second, even if we can identify experience, in the requisite sense, there remains a “dubitable element of interpretation” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 125). To exemplify how our interpretation is influenced by theory van Fraassen submits the example of two people looking at a fire with one person interpreting the experience as oxidization, and the other as phlogiston release. Third, even if we can solve the first two problems we have the issue of the relevant implications which we are to extrapolate from experience “...the logical relations of compatibility, inconsistency, and consequence between the deliverances of experience and the opinions scrutinized remain a problem” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 125). Feyerabend’s critique, he tells us, is applicable to any foundationalist thesis representable as a text. Van Fraassen goes on to assert that it is only non-foundationalist positions which can survive this critique, and therefore we must reply to Feyerabend that the problem for the modern empiricists was not their turning to experience, but rather it was naiveté about what experience is (2002, p. 131). So what is van Fraassen’s *sophisticated*²⁷ conception of what experience is to entail?

Van Fraassen begins by making a distinction similar to the one made regarding *observing* and *observing that* found in *The Scientific Image*. He asserts that there is often a conflation between “experience in the sense of events that happen to us of which we are aware with judgments involved in that awareness” (2002, p. 134). Generally it is hard to

²⁶ Recall that the modern British empiricists were moved to include *reflection* as a source of impressions, as a particular mode of observation.

²⁷ To be clear van Fraassen does not refer to his view of experience as the *sophisticated* view, I have merely referred to it as such to mark the contrast between his conception of experience, and the “naïve” view of experience commonly held in philosophy. I use the word “sophisticated” for the obvious reason that it is definitionally the opposite of the word naïve.

disentangle these two factors in our *experience*, as our perception of an event coincides with an often correct judgment; for example, when I hear my congested cat under my bed, and correctly judge that that is what I am hearing. What van Fraassen wants to say here is that what is actually happening is an *awareness* of an event - hearing a wheezing noise, and a *judgment* - that it is my cat. This judgment, however, is based on my prior opinions and knowledge, namely that I have a cat who suffers from respiratory problems. This distinction between awareness and judgments in experience is easier to see when we make a false judgment. Van Fraassen uses the example of stepping on garden hose looking down and mistaking it for a snake. Here we have an example where we have perceptual awareness of an event happening to us with an incorrect judgment (van Fraassen 2002, p. 134). So, as in *The Scientific Image*, he asserts that we must not conflate awareness in an experience with the judgments that we make in an experience; furthermore, we cannot just say that an experience is an event that happens to us that we are aware. This is because experience is a “success word,” and because an experience needs to be self-attributed.

Van Fraassen establishes that experience is a “success word” due to the common definitions of the term²⁸ which point to the fact that not just anything counts as experience (2002, p. 122). He uses the example of someone meeting a saint, but not knowing that they are a saint. Here we do not have the “awesome experience” of meeting a saint if we do not realize that the person we are talking to is a saint. In order to have a “successful experience” we have to have a background of “intellectual, emotional and

²⁸ Van Fraassen lists a number of definitions such as: “Direct observation of or participation in events as a basis for knowledge,” “practical knowledge, skill, of practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or a particular activity,” “Something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through” (2002, p. 122).

kinesthetic” connections for our experiences to become “literate” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 135). Furthermore, an experience needs to be “self-attributive.” We have to attribute the event as actually happening to us personally. Van Fraassen’s example here is of a mountaineer named Ric O. who has just returned to civilization. Ric O. sees a newspaper and on the front page it says “Ric O. has won a million dollars in the state lottery.” In one scenario Ric O. exclaims “Oh my god I won the lottery!” and he recounts the tale of the day he experienced winning a million dollars. In a second scenario, he sees the newspaper and says “look! Ric O. has won a million dollars” in this situation he has not “self-attributed” the experience of winning a million dollars, and so does not have the experience of winning a million dollars. In both of these scenarios Ric O. is aware, and making a correct judgement, but in the second case he does not realize that the referent of the headline is himself, and has not self-attributed the event, and so lacks the relevant experience (van Fraassen 2002, p. 135).

In light of the foregoing analysis of the elements involved in an experience, van Fraassen asserts that Feyerabend’s critique does not seem to hold. The problem facing experience in Feyerabend’s argument was the ability of distinguishing what counts as experience, interpreting the experience, and finally the problem of extrapolating from experience. Van Fraassen asserts that in light of his analysis of experience, these three problems which form the Jesuit critique of Protestant fundamentalism do not all carry over to experience (2002, p. 136). We have no problem distinguishing events from the events that happen to us personally. We have, *in principle*, no problem making a judgment in response to the events that happen to us. Finally, *in principle*, we do not have a problem understanding what follows from those judgments. He points out that

Feyerabend's argument was against a foundational text the meaning of which was in question; but, with a more *sophisticated* understanding of experience we have something which is on one hand not a text at all (the events that happen to us), and on the other hand we have a text (the interpretation of that event) which is "mine, in my language, created by me in my own language" (van Fraassen, p. 136). What prevents this conception of experience from returning to a naïve foundationalist fundamentalism is the inherent interpretive element that goes into judging the events that happen to us in experience, and the circumstances which we *in principle* cannot easily interpret and from which we cannot easily draw conclusions.

Experience, on van Fraassen's conceptualization cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge because the interpretive element is couched in our own language, which in turn is infused with prior opinion, beliefs, and theories; this is a fact which we come to recognize when we reflect on our language. Furthermore, we cannot be fundamentalists about experience, because of the interpretive element involved in experience. Van Fraassen explains that the event we are interpreting may come "shrouded in uncertainty, ambiguity, and inconsistency. I realize all this; despite my utter and inescapable reliance on my own language and judgment... I am able to doubt myself on many levels, to lesser and greater degrees" (2002, p. 137). The rule of *Sola Experientia* prescribes that "what I have experienced, in the sense of what has really happened to me, is the touchstone for all theory" (van Fraassen 2002, p. 137); but, Van Fraassen clarifies we do not merely accept our immediate judgments as ultimate authority. We cannot escape our reliance on our prior opinions, beliefs, and theoretical commitments in making judgments – we can only start from where we are; at the same time we realize that our judgments are defeasible.

This leads to a puzzle regarding experience: when we realize our “epistemic frailty and sin” we are forced into a position where we have to either ignore our epistemic shortcomings, or accept that we hold an incoherent view where we rely on judgments which we admit to be defeasible. As stance empiricists we cannot commit to the fundamentalist belief in *Sola Experientia* because we recognize that experience involves more than merely raw observational data. Experience also involves subjective judgments which are at once essential *and* potentially defeasible. Stance empiricists then find themselves in a weird position where we are committed to experience, but realize that our experience involves this interpretive element. To amend this tension van Fraassen asserts that rationality will not be established by our having a good starting point, as we can only begin from where we are with our prior opinions, understandings, and theories. Rationality will instead be established on how well we amend our condition (2002, p. 138-139).

At this point, van Fraassen goes on to explain and offer a formula for how we can alter the beliefs involved in our stance. He explains that the empirical sciences abide by the rule of *Sola Experientia* whereby the touchstone for theory is experimental and observational fact; but this rule plays two contrasting yet important roles in our scientific communities. On the one hand, it enforces a *status quo* of what is traditionally held to be empirical; it enforces hegemony of the ruling paradigm. On the other hand, it provides a tool for our ability to critique and amend our accepted opinions (van Fraassen 2002, pp. 140-141, 152). He concludes by stating that “[f]or the empiricist, the way in which scientific practice thus shows how we can let go of beliefs, as opposed to how it dictates belief, is the more inspiring lesson” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 152). How can a person

progress from looking at planets moving across the night sky and observing a geocentric system to looking at planets moving across the night sky and observing a heliocentric system? Outlining the strategy with which this can take place is essential; however, it does not help us to better understand stance empiricism as a philosophical position and what it is or entails in terms of its positive elements.

3.3 Avoiding Naiveté About Experience.

There are clear contrasts between the conception of experience in *The Scientific Image*, and that found in *The Empirical Stance*. I want to draw particular attention to van Fraassen's distinction between *observing* and *observing that* found in *The Scientific Image*, and his distinction between awareness and judgment in *The Empirical Stance*. In *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen explains that there is a distinction to be made between *observing* (a thing, event, or process) and *observing that* (something or other is the case). The former has to do with the biological process of perception, and he uses this conception to explain and refine what is to count as observable; the latter goes beyond the biological to include conceptual background information to establish what is being observed. Classically empiricism has a commitment to the empirical - to experience; we gain knowledge through experience by observing via sensory perception. In *the Scientific Image*, "observable" means what is physiologically perceivable by *us* qua human organisms (van Fraassen 1980, p. 17). This is not a far cry from the conception of experience put forward by the modern British empiricists. In *The Empirical Stance*, however, we are cautioned against naiveté about experience, and it is argued that experience is more than just biological (physiological) *observation*. Van Fraassen asserts that we cannot just say that experience is any event that happens to us of which we are

aware (2002, p. 134). Before observation can enter the picture at all, the events that happen to us require interpretation: we do not merely *observe* we have to *observe that*. In *observing that* we have to make a judgment, we interpret the observation in terms of the conceptual information, opinions, beliefs, and theories we possess. Van Fraassen asserts that experience is a “success word,” and we do not have a successful experience unless we possess the relevant conceptual information. Going back to his example of having the experience of meeting a saint, it seems that if we are not *observing that* he is a saint then we are not able to make the judgment that he is a saint, and we will not self-attribute the experience of meeting a saint. So, we do not “succeed” in having the experience of meeting a saint. To have an experience requires a “successful” self-attributed *observation that*.

In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen has rejected the characterization of empiricism as a foundational thesis, because it results in a vicious circle, a regress, a metaphysical postulate, or in an internally incoherent position. In the foregoing discussion we have seen a further rejection of foundational empiricism, and we are cautioned against being naïve about experience. In light of foregoing discussions on Modern Empiricism, Positivism, and Constructive Empiricism we can see that van Fraassen has rejected all of the classical empiricist conceptions of experience. In *The Empirical Stance* he has argued that we cannot have a foundational concept of experience, as experience has an inherently interpretive element which relies on our prior opinions, beliefs, and theoretical concepts. This is a point he feels the modern empiricists did not seem to pick up on. According to the theories of Locke, Berkley, and Hume experience had two sources: sensory impressions and reflection. Van Fraassen has

argued, however, that this view is naïve about what experience is. Experience is not just awareness of an event, its imprinting on our consciousness – a sensory or reflective perception. Experience involves perception and *judgment* - two elements of experience which, he says, have been classically conflated by empiricists (van Fraassen 2002, p. 134). In *The Scientific Image* van Fraassen rejected the positivist theory/observation dichotomy because we cannot have meaningful observational terms which are devoid of theoretical language. This is a point which is seemingly echoed in *The Empirical Stance* when he draws attention to the point that we interpret events in terms of our theoretical concepts, prior opinions, and beliefs. Despite Van Fraassen's dismissal in *The Scientific Image* of the theory/observation dichotomy, he argues we can still make sense, and make use of, a distinction between observable and unobservable entities. In *The Scientific Image* we get a somewhat clear and disambiguated conception of what is to count as observable, and what is to count as empirical. This view, however, is it seems, completely left behind in *The Empirical Stance* and we are left wondering what we are left to be committed to if we are to have a commitment to the empirical as part of our empirical stance.

Van Fraassen's discussion of experience in *The Empirical Stance* further enforces his rejection of empiricism as a philosophical position with a corresponding dogma. He shows why we cannot abide by the doctrine of *Sola Experientia* and cannot be dogmatic foundationalists about experience. We are shown, again, what empiricism cannot be, but are given extremely little to show us what it is, or could be. We have not been given much in terms of stance empiricism which enables us to better understand empiricism as such. He shows us this puzzle about our commitment to experience, and then offers us a

strategy to amend our beliefs; however, this recipe for shifting beliefs does not help us better understand what stance empiricism is/entails in terms of its positive elements.

I have put forward that the clearest indication we can glean from *The Empirical Stance* of what stance empiricism is or entails is a strategy with a commitment to empirical inquiry, and an attitude regarding this kind of inquiry as being epistemically satisfying. If we are to have a commitment to the empirical we have to have a conception of what is to count as experience; but, we have been cautioned against conceiving of experience naively. Classically experience is what we can observe through sensory perception or reflection; however, in *The Empirical Stance* we are shown that there is more to experience than just *observation*. We are given a complex formula of what is to seemingly count as experience: a “successful” self-attributed *observation that*; but it is not all together clear what role experience is to play in our empirical stance. It is not to be fundamentally endorsed; it cannot act as a foundation for knowledge or for our stance; it is not to be the touch stone for telling us what to believe. So what are we to do with it? What role does experience play in stance empiricism? The answer to this question I assert is not clear, and this further confounds the characterization of the empirical stance and what it is or entails.

Chapter 4. Cast Back Into Obscurity.

That the characterization of stance empiricism, and stances in general, provided by van Fraassen in *The Empirical Stance* is not all together clear, is a sentiment shared by others, and it has led philosophers to try and further flesh out what a stance is or entails. In Chapter 1 I concluded that the clearest indication we can glean from *The Empirical Stance* of what stance empiricism is or entails is that it is a strategy with a commitment to empirical inquiry. In Chapter 3 I argued that given van Fraassen's cautioning against a naïve conception of experience, it is not altogether clear what role the empirical, is to play in the *empirical* stance. In this chapter I will be looking at *stances* more generally, setting aside the analysis of the more narrowly defined category of the *empirical* stance.

That a stance is a type of strategy that we commit to in our epistemic enterprise is a conclusion which has been drawn, to a degree, by a number of other philosophers; however, in light of further considerations, by van Fraassen as it turns out, such *functional characterizations* (following the terminology established by Paul Teller, as explained below) are ultimately too naïve to fully and adequately portray what a stance (let alone an empirical stance) is or entails; this further compounds the problem of vagueness surrounding not only stance empiricism, but stances in general. In Section 1 I will discuss two interpretations of stances which are in line with the characterization of a stance as type of strategy. The first is put forward by Paul Teller in his 2004 paper "Discussion: What Is a Stance?"²⁹, where Teller argues that a stance can best be characterized "functionally, in terms of what it does" (p. 163), and submits that a stance

²⁹ Teller, Paul. "Discussion: What Is a Stance?" *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 121.2 (2004): 159-170.

is like an epistemic policy. The second, is by Darrel P. Rowbottom and Otavio Bueno, who in their 2011 paper, “How to change It: Modes of Engagement, Rationality, and Stance Voluntarism”³⁰, argue that a stance can be understood as a *mode of engagement* and *style of reasoning*. In Section 2 I will argue that these characterizations, and indeed my own characterization of empiricism as a strategy, are inadequate in light of further insights regarding stances put forward by van Fraassen in his 2004 response to Teller.³¹ Van Fraassen asserts that although the functional characterization of a stance as an epistemic policy is apt, the analogy is limited (2004, p. 174). I will further go on to argue that we can apply these comments by van Fraassen to the characterization put forward by Rowbottom and Bueno. In Section 3, I will explain why, in light of these comments by van Fraassen, the *functional characterization* ultimately fails. As it turns out, our epistemic strategy, policy, mode of engagement and style of reasoning (all of which I will refer to as *functional characterizations*) are supposed to be established on our particular stance, and are not isomorphic³² to the given stance itself. I will conclude by arguing that we have been once again left without a clear characterization of stances, further confusing the characterization - and hence our understanding - of what an empirical stance is or entails.

4.1 Functional Characterizations.

I have asserted that the clearest characterization that can be obtained from van Fraassen’s sketch of stances in *The Empirical Stance*, is that a stance is a strategy with a

³⁰ Rowbottom, Darrel P., Bueno, Otavio. “How to change It: Modes of Engagement, Rationality, and Stance Voluntarism.” *Synthese*, 178 (2011): 7-17.

³¹ Van Fraassen, Bas C. “Replies to Discussion on ‘The Empirical Stance.’” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 121.2 (2004): 171-192.

³² The use of the term isomorphic here is adapted from the concept of an isomorphism in mathematics where an isomorphism is defined as a one-to-one relation between two sets. In the context of the discussion in this chapter I will argue that there is not a one-to-one relation between stances (“set 1”), and the given *functional characterizations* (“set 2”).

commitment to a particular type of inquiry (empirical inquiry, in the case of stance empiricism). I arrived at this conclusion having considered van Fraassen's meta-epistemological theory of *epistemic voluntarism* (revealed to be the meta-stance), where we are said to be engaged in an epistemic enterprise of cognitive gains, and that our epistemologies should be developed as strategies and tactics of investigation (2002, p. 82). A similar conclusion is reached by Anjan Chakravartty in his 2004 paper "Stance Relativism: Empiricism versus Metaphysics."³³ Chakravartty asserts that a "stance is a strategy, or combination of strategies, for generating factual beliefs. A stance makes no claim about reality, at least not directly. It is, rather, a sort of epistemic 'policy' concerning which methodologies should be adopted in the generation of factual beliefs" (Chakravartty 2004, p. 175). To glean a better understanding of the concept that our stances can be understood as epistemic policies, Chakravartty refers his reader to Teller's 2004 paper "Discussion: What Is a Stance?". Teller, in an attempt to better understand what a stance is or entails, attempts to characterize stances *functionally* in terms of what they do. This *functional* understanding of stances has been endorsed further by Rowbottom and Bueno, who attempt to flesh out the concept of a stance as an epistemic policy, and offer what they consider to be a more refined *functional characterization* that will include epistemic policies as proper parts.

4.1.1 Teller: Stance as an Epistemic Policy.

Teller argues that we can advocate for a position which asserts E+ (a certain dogma/doctrine of empiricism); however, we do not, in taking a stance, have to advocate E+ as a thesis (p. 160). Teller offers this alternative reading of van Fraassen's conclusion

³³ Chakravartty, Anjan. "Stance Relativism: Empiricism versus Metaphysics." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*. 35 (2004): 173-184.

in hopes of better understanding what a stance can be. After taking us through van Fraassen's rejection of empiricism as a philosophical position that consists in adhering to a factual thesis, Teller submits, admittedly, a somewhat weaker conclusion than van Fraassen's (that empiricism cannot be a philosophical position with a factual thesis), and asserts that empiricism is a position which advocates E+, but that this dogma/doctrine is not held *as* a thesis. Teller explains that the reading which he is advocating turns on what we mean by "rejection" (p. 161). He asserts that we are to understand "rejection" in a sense that to reject some metaphysical principle or proposition is to deny that it holds the same epistemic status as known empirical evidence (p. 161). On the first reading, the one van Fraassen asserts, E+ turns out to be a metaphysical proposition, which E+ must simultaneously reject (since E+ must entail the rejection of metaphysics) – so we have a contradiction, and must reject E+. Teller's alternative reading is that for E+ to imply the rejection of some metaphysical proposition is for E+ to imply that the metaphysical proposition being asserted cannot be "rationally mandated" (p. 161). When we then apply E+ to itself we are similarly shown that E+ cannot be rationally permitted - this, however, does not imply that E+ cannot be believed (Teller, p. 161). What follows from this is that even the respective E+ will not be afforded that same epistemic status as what is empirically grounded, since E+ is not truth-apt.

Teller explains what he means by the term "Thesis" as follows: "Someone believes a statement as a thesis if they believe, or expect, or even 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" (Teller, p. 162). We can have beliefs then, but beliefs that do not necessarily adhere to this technical definition of a

thesis. Teller uses the example of a gambler, who has a belief that their lucky number will be drawn: this belief, however, does not count as “information” (p. 162). So, we can believe a proposition, but not as a factual thesis. For empiricism, and the empirical stance, we can now advance E+, but not as a factual thesis. What Teller infers from E+ not being taken as a factual thesis is that stances are revealed to be not truth-apt (this point will be further clarified by Rowbottom and Bueno as discussed below), but rather can be construed as an attitude of investigation, which Teller refers to as an epistemic guide.

Moving on from the question of the role of factual claims such as E+ (taken as foundational definitions of empiricism), Teller goes on to develop in more detail just what a stance might be. He argues that it is a mistake to try to characterize all stances once and for all, to look for some sort of closed form, and suggests instead that a stance should be taken as being an “open-ended notion” (p. 163). If, however, we are to attempt any sort of positive characterization, we must attempt to characterize a stance functionally in terms of what it does: taken in this light we can expect that a stance is a notion that will evolve to meet our needs (Teller, p. 163). The function of an epistemic stance is to operate as a guideline for developing and evaluating beliefs (Teller, p. 163). To better illuminate a functional understanding of a stance qua epistemic guideline Teller draws the analogy between adopting a stance, and adopting a policy.

Teller asserts that ‘taking a stance’ is a metaphor and that ‘adopting a policy’ is a very closely related metaphor (p. 166). He asserts that taking a stance is like taking an explicitly stated policy. He lists nine characteristics 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...
- 4) Policies are always in need of interpretation and insofar are open-ended...
- 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 involved in administering a policy involves judgment...
- 7) Policies are, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, expressions or implementations of values.
- 8) Policies also function to streamline the decision making process in ways called for because of practical, human limitations.
- 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 of reflecting choice and values, that we cannot we cannot argue for or against policies. (Teller, pp. 166-168).

Teller asserts that adopting an *explicit* policy is akin to taking an *explicit* stance, and we can better understand the *functioning* role of stances by understanding them in light of the role that policies play. Definitionally, a policy can be understood as a course of action or procedure that is adopted and pursued by an individual or community. If we look at stances functionally, we can see a close resemblance to adopting a policy. A policy is a course of action or a procedure that one takes in regard to a particular subject. Similarly a stance is an epistemic guide showing the particular course of action and the appropriate procedures that one should take to engage in with regard to a particular subject. Given that the notion of a policy is more established than that of a stance, drawing the analogy between policies and stances does seem to help illuminate the latter concept.

On Teller's conception of what stances are, he argues that stance empiricism can have a certain doctrine of E+, something like *knowledge comes from experience*, but that this doctrine is an epistemic guide, or attitude of investigation. This appraisal I think is apt. Indeed, there has to be something to distinguish stance empiricism from other kinds of epistemic stances in terms of their positive commitments (*positive* in that it is *not* just a

commitment to critiquing metaphysics). In Chapter 1 I conclude by stating a point similar to Teller's, that a stance can best be understood as a strategy of investigation with a commitment to empirical inquiry. Teller has argued that a stance can be understood as a "guide to inquiry," and we can endorse the respective E+, understood not as a factual thesis, but as a procedure of inquiry which we utilize in our epistemic enterprise.

4.1.2 Rowbottom & Bueno – Stance as a Mode of Engagement and Style of Reasoning.

Rowbottom and Bueno, however, see the analogy between stances and epistemic policies as not entirely adequate, and strive to offer a more fleshed-out characterization of a stance which incorporates the notion of a stance as an epistemic policy. As they see it, their characterization of stances captures Teller's view while also offering a more clear and explicit characterization of the concept of stances. They characterize a stance as being, or involving at its very core, a "mode of engagement" and "style of reasoning" (p. 7). A mode of engagement is explained as "a way of approaching the world (or a given situation)" (Rowbottom and Bueno, p. 9); a style of reasoning "incorporates patterns of inference, diagrams, templates, and other useful devices that are invoked when reasoning about a given situation" (Rowbottom and Bueno, p. 9). A further element involved in stances is that of holding certain propositional attitudes (such as beliefs, desires, and hopes); however, these propositional attitudes can change, and a stance can endure through changes in propositional attitudes. They assert that "a stance provides a way of approaching the world, given certain propositional attitudes, a mode of engaging them, and a particular way of reasoning about the situations we face" (p. 9). Similar to Teller's characterization of stances, Rowbottom and Bueno assert that stances are not truth-apt – they are a "way of going about things" (p. 7). For Rowbottom and Bueno this is because

neither modes of engagement or styles of reasoning are truth-apt. Given that a mode of engagement is a way of interacting with the world it can be seen as successful, or inappropriate perhaps; however, it is not the kind of thing that is *true* or *false*. Similarly a style of reasoning, given that it is a way to make inferences, is not *true* or *false*; it can be seen as truth preserving, or as valid or invalid, but it is not itself *true* or *false* (Rowbottom and Bueno, p. 10).

To exemplify the interaction between modes of engagement and styles of reasoning in adopting a stance, Rowbottom and Bueno show how a shift in our stance changes our mode of engagement with a particular subject and leads us to adopt a different style of reasoning. Their example is of a philosopher of science who adheres to a realist stance, and uses inference to the best explanation as a style of reasoning to introduce unobservable objects. If that person then takes up, or converts to, a constructive empiricist stance, with an accompanying mode of engagement when regarding postulated entities, it is then likely that inference to the best explanation will no longer be seen as a legitimate inferential tool and he or she will no longer utilize it as a style of reasoning (Rowbottom and Bueno, p. 10). This example illustrates how a shift in one's mode of engagement and a corresponding shift in one's style of reasoning are influenced by a shift in one's respective philosophical stance. Rowbottom and Bueno assert that these two joint concepts are at the core of any given stance.

4.2 Naiveté in the Functional Characterization.

I have asserted that the clearest characterization of a stance that can be gleaned from *The Empirical Stance* is a strategy with a commitment to a type of inquiry (and in the case of stance empiricism that would seemingly be empirical inquiry). I came to this conclusion

having taken into account van Fraassen's epistemic voluntarism, where he asserts that we are involved in an epistemic enterprise, and that we should develop epistemologies that act as strategies of investigation (2002, 82). Having looked at the characterization of stances offered by Chakravartty, Teller, and Rowbottom and Bueno, it can be seen that these philosophers have all come to a similar understanding of what a stance is or entails, and that I am not alone in having reached this conclusion. As it turns out, however, van Fraassen himself believes that all of these *functional characterizations* (my own included, by implication) are too naïvely construed, and ultimately they fail to *fully* characterize what a stance is or entails.

In van Fraassen's 2004 paper "Replies To Discussion On *The Empirical Stance*," he addresses the *functional characterization* of stances put forward by Teller. His comments on Teller can be carried over to the characterizations of stances put forward by Chakravartty, Rowbottom and Bueno, as well as my own. All of these characterizations can be seen as *functional* in that they all try to characterize a stance in terms of what it does, or the role it plays in our epistemic life; it is in light of this similarity between these characterizations of a stance that van Fraassen's critique of Teller's characterization can carry over to Chkaravartty, Rowbottom and Bueno's, as well as my own.

In his 2004 paper Van Fraasen concedes that his initial characterization of a stance (as an "attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such – possible including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well" (2002, p. 47)) was "perhaps so brief as to be cryptic" (2004, p. 174). Van Fraassen explains that a stance is something that one can adopt or reject akin to a strategy, that it is an attitude which one adopts in relation to a particular subject; but he makes clear that although understanding stances as an epistemic

policy does provide valuable insight, he goes on to “suggest a limit to the analogy between stance and policies” (2004, p. 174).

In response to Teller, van Fraassen asserts that there is more to a stance as a philosophical position than an epistemic policy, and that stances cannot be “encapsulated in the advocacy of a certain (type of) epistemic policy” (2004, p. 179). Van Fraassen goes on to explain two points of disanalogy between policies and stances. The first is that someone is generally less committed to a policy. A stance is seen by van Fraassen as being taken with regard to the epistemic enterprise writ large, whereas an epistemic policy is adopted with regard to a specific investigation or task. He asserts that “a stance seems more encompassing, whereas policies are usually more explicit, more specific, and more detailed” (2004, 191). These comments by van Fraassen indicate that epistemic policies are not isomorphic to our stance; rather, our epistemic policy will be developed in light of, and be situated within our greater stance.

Van Fraassen’s second point of disanalogy between an epistemic policy and a stance is that a distinction needs to be made between an *epistemological position* (a stance), and an *epistemic policy*. Here he marks a contrast between a scientist and a philosopher of science. An empirical scientist, he says, best exemplifies the form of rational inquiry of the empirical sciences (the *epistemic policy* of the empirical sciences), and he or she may not be a philosopher, or even particularly philosophically minded (2004, p. 179). The empiricist philosopher, on the other hand, will express certain views, value judgments, and attitudes about the practice of the empirical sciences, although he or she may not actively engage in such an inquiry as such (2004, p. 179). Van Fraassen then makes the claim that “an empiricist philosopher will have a characteristic epistemological

stance, that is not at all the same as having an epistemic stance” (2004, p. 179). What I take from these remarks by van Fraassen is that an *epistemological stance* is a stance corresponding to the particular branch of epistemology, or the philosophical position that a philosopher takes; stance empiricism then, it seems, is a type of *epistemological stance*. An *epistemic stance*, instead typified by the empirical scientist, is a stance concerning the particular policy, or strategy of investigation that one adopts when striving to make cognitive gains regarding the types of information that the scientist seeks.

These two points of disanalogy show how the *functional characterizations* of stances which have been offered by Teller, Chakravartty, Rowbottom and Bueno, and myself are ultimately seen as inadequate by van Fraassen on account of apparently being too naïve to *fully* characterize a stance. A stance is not isomorphic to the *functional characterizations* which have been offered. Stances are to be understood as more than an epistemic policy, strategy, or mode of engagement and style of reasoning, and it seems from the foregoing discussion that according to van Fraassen these will be included in our particular stance and will be influenced by it.

So again we are left with a vague characterization of what a stance is. We *have*, on the upshot of the foregoing discussion, been offered a further element to include in the cluster concept of stances - an epistemological (rather than epistemic) policy (/strategy/mode of engagement and style of reasoning). However, we are not any closer to understanding concretely what a stance, and in particular the empirical stance is. Rather we have been told again what a stance cannot be, and the clearest characterization that could be seen from the initial sketch provided by van Fraassen is rejected casting the concept of stances, and the empirical stance back into obscurity.

4.3 Cast Back Into Obscurity.

The foregoing consideration does little to help us better understand stances in general let alone stance empiricism. I have asserted that the clearest characterization of what a stance is or entails is a strategy, a conclusion that has been similarly made, in various ways, by Chakravartty, Teller, Rowbottom and Bueno; but apparently such a characterization is not fully adequate. So, again we find ourselves in a rather perplexing situation when trying to understand what a stance, let alone the empirical stance, is or entails. The clearest characterization that could be seen from van Fraassen's initial sketch in *The Empirical Stance* has been shown to be inadequate. This puts us back at square one when it comes to trying to understand what the empirical stance is or entails, as the clearest characterizations of stances which have been offered are just further elements to be included within the cluster concept of stances. It seems that our epistemic policy or strategy or mode of engagement and style of reasoning will be developed in accordance with the subjective values, attitudes, and opinions which our stance is established on (van Fraassen 2004, p. 179). This brings us full circle to the original problem which I saw with van Fraassen's characterization of stance empiricism, specifically that what the values, attitudes, commitments, and approach of stance empiricism are is not clear, and we are left with a vague and *indeed* cryptic concept.

In Chapter 1 I concluded by asserting that the clearest characterization of what stance empiricism is or entails is a strategy with a commitment to empirical inquiry. In Chapter 3 I asserted that in regard to stance empiricism it is not all together clear what role experience is to play in the empirical stance. Furthermore, in light of the foregoing discussion this problem is further compounded, because stance empiricism seemingly

will be *more* than merely a commitment to empirical inquiry, and this commitment will be established on our stance and is not to encapsulate the stance itself. So what have we been left with? In terms of understanding what a stance is or entails, we only have van Fraassen's initial characterization of a stance as an "attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such (possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well)" (2002, p. 47), and we are to view our stances as being established on our values and attitudes. In terms of understanding the empirical stance, it has not been made clear what these attitudes, commitments, etc. are to be. The best indication we have are van Fraassen's *three characteristics of empiricism*:

- a) A rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and
- b) A strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) that proceed by postulation. (2002, p. 37).
- c) As in science, so in philosophy: disagreement with any admissible factual thesis is admissible. (2002 p. 43).

These three characteristics are the clearest articulation of what stance empiricism is or entails. The problem with limiting ourselves to these three characteristics is that these characteristics are founded through empiricisms recurrent rebellion against, and corresponding critique of metaphysical theorizing. However, as van Fraassen himself has asserted, there must be some positive element to empiricism - but the positive elements of empiricism when taken as a stance remain an enigma.

Chapter 5. "Have You Ever Been *Experienced*?"

Van Fraassen has argued that empiricism is a perennial tradition which has been recast in different instantiations throughout history. In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen sets out to again recast empiricism, but in doing so he has broken the mold of traditional empiricism, and profoundly changed how we traditionally characterize our philosophical positions. A central focus of *The Empirical Stance* is the issue of making sense of conceptual and scientific revolutions, and what van Fraassen is arguing for is a revolution in how we view not only empiricism but our epistemic lives and our epistemologies. In Chapter 2 I argued that we can still engage in philosophical discourse and debate about stances, and that conceiving of our philosophical positions as stances will not lead to the end of philosophical progress. I think that seeing our philosophical positions as stances is potentially viable, and that van Fraassen has pointed out an integral aspect of our philosophical condition by calling attention to the subjective elements of our values, attitudes, commitments and the role that these elements play in our philosophical life and in the philosophical positions that we hold. Paying attention to the subjective elements in our philosophy, and conceiving of, or realizing that, our philosophical positions are ultimately rooted in our respective stance is something which I feel is of lasting significance to philosophy. Furthermore, I am rather sanguine about empiricism as a philosophical position.

However, as I have tried to explain and substantiate in this thesis, there is an issue which is rather perplexing when attempting to understand empiricism as a stance, and that is understanding concretely what stance empiricism is or entails. Van Fraassen has

offered us a new means to view our epistemology as voluntarist stances, but he has done little thereby to positively characterize the *empirical* stance. *The Empirical Stance* is ultimately not very illuminating when it comes to understanding what the empirical stance itself is in terms of the attitudes, commitments, approach, and beliefs which make up an *empirical* stance; ultimately we are left with a rather vague concept.

Before I conclude, there are two further points that I feel need to be addressed. In Section One, I want to return to a point made in van Fraassen's initial sketch of what a stance is or entails – namely, the assertion that our stance will involve beliefs but is not limited to them. This claim is one of the more perplexing elements of stances, and I feel that taken with the requirement of rational permissibility, it results in our stances being, potentially, pragmatically incoherent; and therefore, rationally impermissible. In Section Two I offer a potential objection to the recurrent charge of vagueness that I have made against van Fraassen's stance empiricism, the objection being that for van Fraassen vagueness is a nonissue, as it is something he has embraced in his philosophy. In *The Empirical Stance* he asserts vagueness is part of our most precise disciplines, and that it is a redeeming quality (p. 145); in *The Scientific Image* he asserts that essentially all predicates are vague and that a vague predicate is useful as long as we have clear cases and counter-cases (p. 16). I will conclude by arguing that even by van Fraassen's own lights, stance empiricism is problematically vague.

5.1 Stances, Beliefs, Pragmatic Coherence, and Rational Permissibility.

In the characterization of a stance put forward by van Fraassen, he has been adamant that a stance involves beliefs, but it is not limited to these beliefs and can endure when these beliefs have changed (2002, pp. 48, 62). However, in his 2004 "Replies to Discussion on

The Empirical Stance,” he asserts that if we are to maintain a pragmatically coherent stance, then we cannot maintain or hold a commitment without a belief in that commitment (p. 176). These two points taken together result in a problem: if our stance is to be pragmatically coherent then it must involve certain beliefs which are essential to holding that stance.

In his 2004 paper van Fraassen explains that a stance is a cluster concept, involving attitudes, commitments, an approach, and that it may also include certain beliefs; moreover, from his response to Teller it can also be seen that a stance will also involve certain epistemic policies or strategies taken to specific investigations (to which, again, it is not limited). Van Fraassen goes on to explain that a stance has to have unity among these elements, specifically that there must be pragmatic coherence among them (2004, p. 176). He explains that we cannot pragmatically have a commitment without a belief in that commitment. He also mentions that stance empiricists will have a commitment to empirical inquiry (2004, p. 173). Let us suspend for the moment my conclusion from Chapter 3 that we have not been given a clear indication of what this commitment is to entail, or what we are to hold as the empirical. If an empiricist is to have a commitment to empirical inquiry, he or she cannot maintain that commitment coherently without a belief that empirical investigation is a satisfactory and, at least mostly, reliable means to generate beliefs. We cannot coherently hold, or endorse, a commitment to empirical inquiry without a belief in its effectiveness in our epistemic enterprise. If we are to hold attitudes, commitments, approaches, etc., and these elements

make up our stance, then it seems certain beliefs are required for our stance to be a pragmatically coherent position.³⁴

Returning to *The Empirical Stance*, however, we see the assertion that our stance is not limited to the beliefs which are included in our stance. According to van Fraassen, our stance is not limited to our beliefs, and can endure through changes in our beliefs. This claim, however, is in conflict with our need for pragmatic coherence between the elements involved in our stance. A stance is established on our attitudes, commitments, etc. and to hold these attitudes, commitments, etc., we have to have a corresponding belief in them; but, van Fraassen has asserted that the beliefs included in our stance do not define it and can be changed, and yet the stance will endure. This does not seem possible - there have to be *some* beliefs that are requisite to holding our stance. This results directly from van Fraassen's requirement that a stance be rationally permissible. Recall that for a stance to be rationally permissible it must be logically consistent and pragmatically coherent. If a stance is to be pragmatically coherent then it cannot involve attitudes, commitments, and an approach without corresponding beliefs in the efficacy of these elements. If we did not have a belief in these elements we would find ourselves in a broadly Moore paradoxical situation where we would be making an assertion similar to "P, and I do not believe that P". So, these aforementioned beliefs cannot be done away with, if we abandon our beliefs in these elements, then it cannot be the case that we automatically maintain our respective attitudes, commitments, approach, etc., and automatically have our stance remain pragmatically coherent whilst and after such momentous changes as abandonment of our beliefs. As we saw in Chapter 2, van

³⁴ Chad Mohler in his 2007 "The Dilemma of Empiricist Belief" argues a similar point to the one I make here.

Fraassen has compared conversion to a stance with religious conversion. We can draw a similar parallel with the issue at hand. Theists cannot give up their belief in God and still automatically maintain the same *religious stance*. Similarly for stance empiricism, if we cannot maintain our attitudes, commitments, our approach, etc., then we seemingly cannot maintain our stance, as these are the very elements which define the stance we hold. Furthermore, in order to maintain our attitudes, commitments, our approach etc., and in order to maintain a pragmatically coherent stance, we have to have corresponding beliefs in these elements. Therefore, there have to be *some* beliefs which are requisite to holding an empirical stance, otherwise we find ourselves in incoherence.

5.2 The Problem With Vagueness.

A central aspect of *The Empirical Stance* is the issue of dealing with conceptual and scientific revolutions, and developing an epistemology which takes into account and can cope with our historically tumultuous epistemic lives. Stances are advocated as a conceptualization of our philosophical positions which can endure through these conceptual revolutions, inasmuch as stances are in one respect supposed to help us develop strategies for investigation (rather than rigid theories about what the world is like), hence are not limited to the specific beliefs which are involved in the stance at any given stage of our epistemic development or history. The ability of a stance to evolve and adapt in response to conceptual revolutions is one of stance-ism's greatest boons, as van Fraassen sees it. I take it that this is why van Fraassen has left what an empirical stance is or entails to be a somewhat open ended notion, hence intentionally vague. The problem I see with this element of vagueness about the specific elements and beliefs that make up a stance is that it makes it rather difficult to positively characterize the empirical stance.

This is because a particular stance will not be limited to any particular belief which we could use to concretely explain our position. But, for a stance to be identifiable it must be limited, hence committed, to *something*, and for stance empiricism there has to be something which makes it identifiable as an *empirical* stance – there has to be empirical attitudes, commitments, and approaches, with all of the beliefs which are essential to coherently holding these elements in our particular stance.

Throughout this thesis I have recurrently charged van Fraassen with vagueness as to what the empirical stance is or entails. In response to my criticism, it could be replied that vagueness is not a problematic concept for van Fraassen. Indeed, van Fraassen himself declares that this is true; both in *The Empirical Stance* and in *The Scientific Image* he has addressed the concern of vagueness in our philosophy. In Chapter 3, I explained that on van Fraassen's conception, experience has two elements – awareness of an event, and a judgement. It is in the interpretive element of our experience that we run into the problem that our interpretation could be defeasible, and we recognize our “epistemic frailty” (van Fraassen 2002, p. 138). Van Fraassen asserts that our awareness may come “shrouded in uncertainty, ambiguity, and inconsistency” (2002, p. 137): recall his example of stepping on the garden hose and making the mistaken judgment that it was a snake. He goes on to explain that we can tolerate vagueness and ambiguity in our theories, and that there are two common misconceptions about ambiguity and vagueness (2002, p. 145).

The first misconception is that vagueness and ambiguity are absent from our discourses in what are considered our most precise disciplines, mathematics and science. The second misconception is that vagueness and ambiguity are defects. He asserts that

ambiguity and vagueness are present throughout the history of our “most precise discourses,” and moreover that it is essential to these discourses (2002, p. 145). If we look at the sciences we find vagueness and ambiguity at two levels. First there is vagueness and ambiguity involved in the theories that offer a representation of the world as thus or so. In offering a representation, there is an inherent interpretive element when observing phenomena and developing a theory intended to accurately represent those phenomena. Second, the representation itself is subject to more than one tenable but different interpretation (van Fraassen 2002, p. 151). The redeeming quality of vagueness and ambiguity is found in the throes of conceptual and scientific revolutions, where we can bring to light these vague, incomplete, and ambiguous elements of the old theory, as we establish the emerging theory (van Fraassen 2002, p. 141). So, vagueness, and ambiguity offer us a way to adjust and evolve our theories. I take it that this is supposed to carry over to empiricism, where we are similarly interpreting observations, and we can evolve or recast empiricism by pointing out interpretive elements which were not implied by experience. An example of this sort of conversion taking place in empiricism could perhaps be seen in the development from Locke’s *indirect realism* to Berkeley’s *idealism*, where Berkeley brings attention to, and dismisses elements in, Locke’s theory (namely material substance) which were not given in sense experience. So, van Fraassen sees vagueness and ambiguity as being part of our epistemic enterprise, and furthermore does not see vagueness as a defect.

In *The Scientific Image*, when addressing Maxwell’s critique that we cannot find a clear line between observable and unobservable entities, van Fraassen asserts that we cannot solve this problem without arbitrariness. Recall from Chapter 3 that van Fraassen

puts forward that ‘observable’ is a vague predicate, that almost all predicates are vague, and that this is not a problem so long as we have clear cases and counter-cases (1980, p. 16). Here again we see that he has no qualms with vagueness. So, a response to my recurrent critique may be that the charge of vagueness is a nonissue for van Fraassen, as he has recurrently embraced it in his philosophy. He sees it as being entrenched in our most precise disciplines, and an inherent part of experience; furthermore, vagueness does not form a problem, in demarcating observable from unobservable predicates, as long as we have clear cases and counter-cases.

I *can* concede these points. In science we are interpreting theories, and trying to represent phenomena; in this there will be an interpretation, and there will always be some vagueness and ambiguity in that interpretation. With regard to experience, van Fraassen is right in pointing out the awareness aspect of experience is separate from our judgements about what has been given in that awareness, and that there is interpretation going on which may be shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty. I can even concede that vagueness will not be a problem if we *have* clear cases and counter-cases to judge our predicates by.

The problem facing van Fraassen’s stance empiricism, however, is that we have *not* been given a clear case. This is what I have been trying to explain and substantiate throughout my thesis - we have no clear positive characterization of stance empiricism. We have been offered a clear counter-case: speculative metaphysics; but we have no clear case of stance empiricism. In Chapter 1 I argued that the clearest characterization of what stance empiricism is or entails is as a strategy of investigation with a commitment to empirical inquiry; however, in Chapter 3 I argued that we do not have a clear conception

of the empirical, since that concept relies on the concept of experience, and it is not clear what role experience is to play in stance empiricism. In Chapter 4 I argued that given van Fraassen's further comments on stances, the characterization of a stance as a strategy or epistemic policy or mode of engagement and style of reasoning is not adequate in fully encapsulating what a stance is or entails. So, the clearest case of what stance empiricism, and indeed any stance, is or entails is rejected, and we are left with no clear case; therefore, the vagueness in stance empiricism *is* problematic, even by van Fraassen's own lights, and cannot just be waved aside as a nonissue.

5.3 Concluding Remarks.

In *The Empirical Stance* van Fraassen set out to uncover "what is empiricism, and what could it be, if it is to be a viable philosophy today?" (p. 31). Recall from Chapter 1 that Van Fraassen has rejected the canonical characterization of empiricism, as a philosophical position established on a factual thesis or doctrine. He has argued that a univocal empiricist thesis, such as *all knowledge comes from experience*, is not found when looking at the history of philosophy. Moreover, he has argued that if empiricism is conceived as a philosophical position which is established on a foundational thesis, then it is ultimately an untenable position. In asserting a foundational empiricist thesis we end up with a vicious circle, a regress, or a metaphysical postulate. Furthermore, he has asserted that any empiricist thesis will ultimately fail, as it will not be able to provide a critique of metaphysics while at the same time being immune to such a critique. In light of the failure of empiricism taken as philosophical position established on a factual thesis or doctrine, van Fraassen has asserted that empiricism can be a philosophical position that consists in a stance. But what is the empirical stance? As I have strived to substantiate

throughout my thesis this has not been made clear and we have been left with a rather vague concept.

In Chapter 1 I asserted that the clearest characterization we can see from van Fraassen's sketch of a stance is that it is a strategy with a commitment to empirical inquiry. This conclusion was reached after considering van Fraassen's concept of epistemic voluntarism, and his assertion that our epistemologies should develop strategies for investigation. In Chapter 2 I addressed a prominent critique put forward against van Fraassen's stance-ism, and argued that we *can* engage in philosophical disputes between opposing stances, and that stance empiricism can legitimately hold on to its most historically salient element – the empiricist rebellion against and corresponding critique of metaphysical theorizing. In Chapter 3 I returned to my initial characterization of stance empiricism, as a strategy with a commitment to empirical inquiry. I then went on to argue that it is not all together clear what role experience, and the empirical is to play in stance empiricism. Van Fraassen has cautioned against conceiving of experience naively. "Experience" is not to be fundamentally endorsed, it cannot act as a foundation for knowledge or for our stance, it is not to be the touch stone for telling us what to believe; so, it is not clear what we are to do with it, or what role experience is to play in stance empiricism. In Chapter 4 I argued that in light of van Fraassen's 2004 discussion of stances and his rejection of the adequacy of *functional characterizations*, the characterization of a stance as a strategy, or as an epistemic policy or mode of engagement and style of reasoning, is not fully adequate. So, the clearest characterization of the empirical stance that could be seen from van Fraassen's sketch of stances in *The*

Empirical Stance turns out to be too naïve, and we are again at a loss as to what stance empiricism, or a stance in general, is or entails.

Van Fraassen has offered us a new way to view empiricism, and epistemology in general, as stances, but what he has offered is vague and indeed cryptic. As I have argued it seems that van Fraassen has left the concept of the empirical stance to be an open-ended concept and hence intentionally vague. In conclusion I want to assert that in attempting justify vagueness as a boon, van Fraassen has done away with what is perhaps the oldest philosophical tradition: a commitment to clarity in developing and understanding concepts and theories. This tradition goes back as far as Plato. In the earliest Platonic Dialogues we see clarity as a goal in the attempt to understand the *essence* and not merely the *examples* of our philosophical concepts. The Socratic Method itself is a strategy for clarification. For example the opening problem in Plato's *Meno* is how can virtue be taught if we do not know what it is? We are in a similar predicament with the vagueness of stances: how can we identify ourselves, or others, as stance empiricists if we do not have a clear conception of what the empirical stance is or entails?

We have not been offered a positive characterization of what stance empiricism is or entails, and as I have concluded in the forgoing section, the lack of a clear case as to what stance empiricism is or entails results in a problematic form of vagueness, even by van Fraassen's own lights. I assert that the only way to alleviate this problematic form of vagueness is for van Fraassen to face the music and bring to light the defining elements, the clear cases, of the empirical stance. Otherwise we are left with a vague and cryptic concept, with no means to identify what the empirical stance, or a stance in general, is or entails. For a stance to be identifiable it must be limited, hence committed, to something,

and for stance empiricism there has to be something which makes it identifiable as an *empirical* stance; however, what this is exactly has been left unclear, the empirical stance remains an enigma.

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