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## Empiricism, Stances and the Problem of Voluntarism

*Peter Baumann*

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Empiricism can be very roughly characterized as the view that our knowledge about the world is based on sensory experience. Our knowledge about the world is "based" on sensory experience in the sense that we could not know what we know without relying on sense experience. This leaves open the possibility that sense experience is only necessary but not sufficient for the knowledge based upon it<sup>1</sup>-as long as the non-empirical elements are not themselves sufficient for the relevant piece of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The basing relation is not just a genetic one but also a justificatory one: Sense experience does not only lead to beliefs which happen to count as knowledge but also qualifies them as knowledge.

In his important book *The Empirical Stance* Bas van Fraassen characterizes traditional empiricism at one point in a more negative way-as involving the rejection of "metaphysical" explanations which proceed by postulating the existence of something not

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1 "But although all our cognition commences *with* experience, yet it does not on that account all arise *from* experience." (Kant, CpR, B1).

2 This gives us a broad notion of empiricism which covers both radical empiricism according to which sense experience is also sufficient for knowledge about the world and a form of Kantianism according to which such knowledge has empirical as well as a priori elements. Nothing depends on this difference in the following.

given in experience (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 37). Van Fraassen also gives a rough, positive and general characterization of empiricism as "something like" the view that "experience is the one and only source of information" (van Fraassen 2002, 43; cf. van Fraassen 1995, 69-70; cf. on problems with such principles Feyerabend 1981 and van Fraassen 1997).

Van Fraassen argues that empiricism runs into unsolvable problems when it is conceived of as a view about something. His proposed solution is to see it as a "stance": an "attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such-possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well" (van Fraassen 2002, 47-48; see also van Fraassen 2004a, van Fraassen 2004b, sec.1, van Fraassen 1995, 83, 86, and Teller 2004). I start with a discussion of the problems of empiricism taken as a view<sup>3</sup> (I). The main focus of this paper (II) will be on a critical discussion of van Fraassen's own proposal. I will argue that it contains a certain form a voluntarism which is very problematic. But first, what is the problem of empiricism van Fraassen diagnoses?

### *I. The Problems of Empiricism*

Actually, it looks like there are two problems.

#### 1. Incoherence?

The first problem arises as soon as one asks oneself what the epistemological status of the basic thesis of empiricism is. Van Fraassen calls it "E+"; it says, according to him, that

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3 If not indicated otherwise, I mean this by "empiricism" in section I.

"experience is the one and only source of information" (van Fraassen 2002, 43). We can also paraphrase E+ in the way indicated above: Our knowledge about the world is based on sensory experience. Now, the question is whether E+ itself is empirical or a priori (assuming that this and related distinctions are tenable). Adherents of empiricism won't be very eager to classify it as synthetic a priori. Hence, only two classical options seem to remain: Either E+ is analytic or empirical. Van Fraassen does not take the idea that it could be a priori or analytic seriously at all (cf. van Fraassen 1994, sec.1.4 but cf. Cruse 2007, 502-505 and also Chakravartty 2007 who argues that any feasible form of empiricism contains some metaphysical elements). It does indeed seem unpromising to argue that the analysis of the concept of knowledge leads to empiricism. The only option which is left is thus the idea that E+, the dogma of empiricism, is itself an empirical, factual thesis. But then incoherence threatens: "Contraries of E+ are not compatible with E+, yet must be admitted!" (van Fraassen 2002, 43). Those contraries (non-empiricist theses) have- according to the empiricist- to be admitted to philosophical or scientific inquiry because they are also factual theses; the empiricist cannot and does not want to exclude any factual thesis from discussion from the beginning. However, if empiricists admit contraries, their critique of alternatives loses its bite; if they don't they will have to turn against their own thesis and treat it like a metaphysical dogma (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 46). Empiricism is thus not better off than its metaphysical counterpart and "reduced to absurdity" (van Fraassen 2002, 46, 40-46, *passim*; cf. van Fraassen 1994, sec.1, van Fraassen 1995, 68-72, and van Fraassen 2004b, 172-173; cf. also Ladyman 2004, sec.2, Lipton, 2004, sec.1,

Teller 2004, 159-161, Muders 2006, 115, Ho 2007, sec.1, Mohler 2007 and Jauernig 2007, sec.2).

It is not obvious what exactly the problem is here and van Fraassen doesn't go into much detail. Is it logical inconsistency? If part of what the empiricist thesis,  $E+$ , said was that some contrary thesis is true, then we would have a version of the liar paradox before us. But this is clearly not what van Fraassen has in mind here. Something like " $E+$  is most probable but some contrary of  $E+$  is more probable" is contradictory too, but besides van Fraassen's point. Or is the empiricist thesis that theses contrary to  $E+$  are both admissible and not admissible (cf. Ho 2007, sec.1, Mohler 2007, Cruse 2007, 490-491, 500, and Jauernig 2007, sec.2)? No, the content of  $E+$  does not entail anything like that. Hence, there simply doesn't seem to be anything logically inconsistent here.

Perhaps it is a kind of pragmatic incoherence? Perhaps the empiricist is trying to do the impossible: To fully adhere to a thesis in the sense of trying to do whatever it asks him to do and not to admit contraries to  $E+$  while the thesis asks him not to fully adhere to any thesis and to admit such contraries? It doesn't look like it. Empiricism of this kind would not simply be a theoretical view but also make practical recommendations (about what to admit or not to admit); this understanding of empiricism, however, is much closer to van Fraassen's stance empiricism than to the kind of empiricism as view which he is criticizing (cf. van Fraassen 2007, 372-373). But even if that was what van Fraassen had in mind here, it would only show that one cannot coherently adhere to empiricism. But what does that tell us about the truth of empiricism? Apart from that: Why should the empiricist not

be less than fully but still strongly committed to his thesis? This would remove the charge of pragmatic incoherence.

The best bet seems to be that van Fraassen has epistemic incoherence in mind. If the empiricist fully believes in his basic thesis, then he cannot fully believe in what one of its corollaries entails (according to van Fraassen), namely that a contrary thesis might be true (for all he knows). In that case, the empiricist would either have to stick with his tolerance of other positions and give up his critique of them or undermine his own position by turning dogmatic: "There is now either no longer any bite to the critique [of contrary positions], or else it [empiricism] bites its own tail." (van Fraassen 2002, 46).

We get closer to the core of the real problem if we assume that the empiricist is strongly but not fully committed to E+. He can, at the same time, concede-as a good fallibilist-that he might be wrong. It is not incoherent to hold on to a thesis which entails that contrary theses are admissible to inquiry and at the same time criticize those alternatives; it is also not incoherent to put oneself to the test while being confident that one will do better than others. The empiricist neither has to lose his bite nor to turn against himself. The empiricist could simply be strongly (though not fully) confident and expect that E+, the empiricist thesis, will come out as the winner at the end of the day. A fallibilist empiricism seems to avoid incoherence (cf. Rowbottom 2005, 216-221 and Mohler 2007, sec.7).

But how is that possible, one might ask? Wouldn't he have to justify E+? And how could he do that? This leads, according to van Fraassen, to Agrippa's famous trilemma of justification. This I take to be the real problem van Fraassen is talking about. What appears

to be a problem of incoherence is only apparent and collapses into the trilemma of justification. Before I go into that, I want to make two final remarks about the charge of incoherence.

First, the main contrary of empiricism, for van Fraassen, is metaphysics. Unfortunately, there is a subtle ambiguity in the term "metaphysics". It can be understood as a view or thesis which denies E+ or empiricism: Not all our knowledge about the world is based on sensory experience; experience is not the only source or a necessary condition of information. What distinguishes empiricists from metaphysicians in this first sense is the content of their views; we could call this first aspect "content-empiricism" or "content-metaphysics". However, "metaphysics" can also refer not so much to the content of a thesis or view but rather to the way its adherents try to justify it: in an empirical (e.g., a scientific) or in a non-empirical way (e.g., by conceptual analysis); we could call this second aspect "methodological empiricism" or "methodological metaphysics". Both distinctions are orthogonal to each other. One can be a content-empiricist and a methodological metaphysician as well as a content-metaphysician and a methodological empiricist: The Logical Positivists belong into the first group (insofar as they aimed to argue for empiricism with armchair methods) while cognitive scientists who believe that we do have non-empirical knowledge about, e.g., syntactic structures of languages belong into the second group. Unfortunately, both senses play a role in van Fraassen's discussion of empiricism and are not clearly distinguished.

Second: If empiricism as a view is incoherent, then empiricism as a stance is all the more so. How can the empiricist be committed to his stance while admitting of contrary

positions (cf. also Rowbottom 2005, 213-214, Cruse 2007, 493-499, and Lipton 2004, 148-149 here but also van Fraassen 2004b, 185-188 insisting that this problem won't arise for stances)?

## 2. Trilemma?

How can the empiricist thesis itself be justified? Given that only empirical justifications seem admissible (at least to van Fraassen) we are faced with the following classical trio of unattractive options (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 39-40):

- (a) Foundationalism:  $E^+$  is basic and neither in need of nor capable of further justification;
- (b) Infinite Regress:  $E^+$  has to be justified by some more basic principle ( $E^{++}$ ) which in turn has to be justified by some further principle and so on, ad infinitum;
- (c) Circularity:  $E^+$  has to be justified with recourse to something else which, in the end, relies on  $E^+$ .

Van Fraassen holds that all three options are clearly unacceptable. He doesn't even discuss (b) and (c). He rejects (a) because of the alleged incoherence (see above); we can reformulate this concern as dissatisfaction with the lack of any justification for  $E^+$ .



However, it is worth noting that there is still room to move for the empiricist who wants to justify his core thesis. The first point he could make is that circularity need not be a problem. Sure, logical circularity is a problem but epistemic circularity need not be. Alston 1986 has argued that one can justify the assumption that sense perception is reliable by referring to the good track record of our senses. In order to do the latter one would have to (justifiedly) rely on our senses but as long as this is not turned into the premise of an argument there is no logical but only epistemic circularity and nothing vicious about it. In a similar way one could try to argue that all the empirical data we have suggest that empiricism is true. The empiricist could justify reliance on empirical data by relying on his core thesis without using it as a premise in an argument. There would thus be no vicious circularity but only harmless epistemic circularity. To be sure, this idea is not implied by E+ but one might be tempted to use it as a way out of the trilemma.

Without going further into the details it already becomes clear that things are not quite that simple. Certainly, the empiricist finds himself in a situation where he has to respond to non-empiricist requests for justification. So, he cannot simply rely on E+ without using it explicitly as a premise in an argument. However, fortunately for the empiricist, he need not rely on his core thesis in order to be able to use empirical data as support for empiricism. The above distinction between the content and the methodology of empiricism comes in handy here. Empirical data can support an empiricist thesis even if it is an open question whether there could, in principle, be other, empirical or non-empirical (e.g., philosophical) evidence which suggests the falsity of the empiricist thesis. In other words, the empiricist could show the non-empiricist his empirical data and challenge the

non-empiricist to present their (empirical or non-empirical) evidence against empiricism. The debate between “apriorists” and empiricists about language learning would be a paradigm case. As long as the non-empiricist does not offer better evidence against the empiricist, the latter holds his position. If the empirical evidence points into more than one direction then it might be difficult to come to some conclusion but views about empiricism don’t have to bias the decision. Even if there is a conflict between a priori arguments and empirical evidence, people can in principle solve that conflict without deciding in advance whether empiricism is true or false (an apriorist could be convinced otherwise by empirical data and an empiricist could be convinced otherwise by a priori arguments). There is nothing even epistemically circular about this kind of argument (cf. for a similar kind of argument in a different context Stich 1990, 146-149). If empiricism is the best explanation of the data, then there does not seem anything left to ask for in addition. There is nothing wrong with an empirical argument for empiricism as long as the empiricist is also a fallibilist in the sense just explained and as long as one does not expect justification to be final (“Letztbegründung”).<sup>4</sup> This also removes Agrippa’s trilemma.

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4 Millgram 2006, 406 holds that there could be an empirical argument for the empirical stance but that van Fraassen does not present any such argument. Cf. also Rowbottom 2005, 216-221 and especially Mohler 2007, sec.7 here. According to van Fraassen 1994, sec.1.4., however, the empiricist cannot put his empiricism to the test in a non-question begging way; the remarks above should be seen as a reply to this. Van Fraassen 1995, 74-79 argues that the empiricist can neither confirm nor disconfirm his own basic thesis in an empirical way (he also mentions the debate on nativism shortly here: cf. 76-77); it is also interesting that van Fraassen make some fallibilist remarks in this very context (cf. 83). Cf. also Nagel 2000, 369-371 who argues that van Fraassen faces the problem of avoiding to turn empiricism into an at least partly a priori position. - One might object that the differences between empiricism and metaphysics are too deep to allow for the existence of some “common ground” from which one could, in principle, adjudicate the dispute (cf. on the idea of common ground here: Muders 2006, 117 and, in reply, van Fraassen 2006, 169-170). However, if the disagreement is *so* deep, then it is not clear any more in what sense or whether there is really disagreement in the first place. One could perhaps reply that Kuhnian incommensurability between theories gives us a model of real and deep disagreement without the possibility of a (fully) rational decision in favour of one side. I cannot go into this here.

Like in the case of the charge of incoherence, there is irony in van Fraassen's trilemma objection against the empiricist: An analogous objection can be made against his view of empiricism as a stance. Why should people take the empirical stance rather than the metaphysical stance?<sup>5</sup> Van Fraassen does not claim or argue that this request for justification is somehow besides the point or based on some misunderstanding. But if stances are capable of and in need of justification, then we seem to face a trilemma of justification for stances. If there is such a problem in the case of E+, then there is presumably also one in the case of empiricism as a stance. Nothing at all would have been gained by the move towards stances. To be sure, van Fraassen 2002, 48-49 briefly mentions this problem but doesn't really say much about it. He points out – against Ayer and the Logical Positivists – that a rational debate about values and stances is possible (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 61-62 and van Fraassen 2004c, sec.2) but he doesn't tell us how exactly (cf. also Ladyman 2004, 140, Muders 2006, 116-118 and van Fraassen's reply to Muders in 2006, 169-170 and to Jauernig and Ho in van Fraassen 2007, 375-378).

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5 cf. Chakravartty 2004; Rowbottom 2005. Muders 2007, 114-115, 119-122 argues that van Fraassen faces a dilemma: Either stances differ essentially from belief systems but then they are not rationally debatable; or they are based on beliefs but then stance empiricism faces the same problem van Fraassen poses for traditional empiricism (cf. also van Fraassen 2006, 167-170 for a reply as well as van Fraassen 1994, sec.3.1). Ho 2007, sec.3 and Chakravartty forthcoming raise the problem of relativism for stances (cf. van Fraassen 2004c, sec.2). van Fraassen 2006, 170 (cf. also van Fraassen 1994, sec.3.1) remarks that it is also very difficult to rationally decide between deeply divergent belief systems; if that is not a problem with respect to beliefs, then why should it be a problem for stances?

## *II. Stances as the Solution and the Problem of Voluntarism*

So much about the problems of empiricism as a view. They motivate van Fraassen to deny that empiricism should be understood as a doctrine or a factual view at all. It rather is a stance: an "attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such-possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well" (van Fraassen 2002, 47-48). A bit later he lists "attitudes, commitments, values, goals" (van Fraassen 2002, 48). It is interesting that he includes beliefs. This shows that he is a cognitivist or at least not a non-cognitivist about stances. It is not obvious whether the inclusion of beliefs creates a problem for van Fraassen. Even if stances cannot be equated with systems of beliefs (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 48), the latter could make a huge difference when it comes to the choice between empiricism and metaphysics. But then we might be back with the problems of empiricism taken as a view or system of beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Another desideratum concerns the relative vagueness of van Fraassen's explanations of what a stance is. How many of them are there and which ones are there? The main problem I want to raise here, however, has to do with something different, namely voluntarism. Van Fraassen's stance-empiricism runs into problems because it contains an unacceptable form of voluntarism. I start with a discussion of belief-voluntarism.<sup>7</sup> The reason is simply that the problems of voluntarism are clearest in the case

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6 Mohler 2007, sec.3, esp. 212-213, argues that stances still require beliefs and are therefore susceptible to van Fraassen's own incoherence charge. Cf. in reply van Fraassen 2007, 372-374.

7 On this kind of epistemic voluntarism see: Alston 1988; Audi 2001; Bennett 1990; Engel 1999; Feldman 2001; Foley 1994; Frankish 2007; Ginet 2001; Govier 1976; Holyer 1983; James 1963; Montmarquet 1986; Naylor 1985; Pojman 1986, Price 1954; Scott-Kakures 1994; Steup 2000; Walker 1996; Williams 1973; Winters 1979; Zemach 1997. As classic positions see Descartes, *Meditationes*, Med. IV as well as Hume, *Treatise*, 183, 624, and Hume, *Enquiry*, 48-50. See also van Fraassen 2007, 351.

of belief. And we can learn something from the case of belief and apply it to the case of stances.

## 1. Belief-Voluntarism

### (a) What it Is

Why do we believe what we believe? In some cases a subject believes that *p* because of epistemic reasons for “*p*”, that is, reasons related to the truth of the belief. An epistemic reason for the belief that *p* is something which supports the claim that “*p*” is true. I use the term “epistemic reason” in a very broad sense here. A subject might come to hold a belief because she acknowledges the overwhelming evidence supporting it. A subject might also hold a belief simply because her cognitive apparatus works in a truth-conducive way, no matter whether they think about evidence or justification for that belief (according to some, perceptual beliefs are like that). In all such cases the subject holds the belief “for epistemic reasons”.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, there are cases where a subject believes that *p* because they want it to be the case that *p* (e.g., in cases of unconscious wishful thinking). In these cases, the subject believes that *p* for non-epistemic, pragmatic reasons which are not related to the truth but to other factors like utility or happiness (cf. Williams 1973, 149-150). A pragmatic reason for the belief that *p* would be that believing *p* is a means to some end (or

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<sup>8</sup> More could be said about the notion of an epistemic reason but I take the remarks above to be sufficient for our purposes here. For a helpful map on many related issues see, e.g., Alston 1985.

perhaps even an end in itself).<sup>9</sup> There might also be cases where the subject believes what they believe for no reason (epistemic or non-epistemic) whatsoever.<sup>10</sup>

Belief-voluntarism is the thesis that one can acquire beliefs at will or, more precisely, that one can intentionally acquire or sustain a particular belief without having any epistemic reasons (good or bad) for that belief.<sup>11</sup> The typical case would be one where a subject comes to believe or continues to believe something purely for pragmatic reasons. The relevant intention need not be a conscious one. The case of the person who unconsciously gets herself to believe that she can perform a difficult task simply because she thinks that confidence is necessary for successful performance is a paradigm example. Given our explanation, the denial of belief-voluntarism is compatible with the acknowledgement that desires often influence or bias our beliefs when this influence is not intentional. Some cases of biased thinking are like that.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Again, many further questions could be raised about this explanation but we cannot and need not go into this here.

10 To be sure, I am not using the word “reason” in the sense of “cause” here (“The reason why the window broke was that it was hit by a stone”). I am only talking about epistemic and pragmatic reasons here. This does, of course, not imply that such reasons could not be causes (of actions, for instance).

11 One could add: and without believing one has such a reason. Since that would in itself constitute a reason for the belief, we can omit this additional clause here. – The scope of “intentionally” is narrow here: The intention is to acquire or sustain a particular belief. The intention can but need not be to do that without epistemic reasons. - For the sake of simplicity, I will not deal with cases here where there is some but insufficient epistemic reason or inconclusive reason for the belief (cf. Ginet 2001, 66-67 who argues that this licenses the acquisition of belief at will; cf. also Raz 1999, 9). For such cases, the same things hold, *mutatis mutandis*, as for the case in which there is no epistemic reason whatsoever. Similar things hold in cases of conflicting evidence (cf. Zemach 1997) or in cases where the subject refuses to look at evidence because that might turn against her beliefs. I will also not go into cases of over-determination where there are both epistemic reasons and non-epistemic reasons or causes for the relevant belief (cf. on this Frankish 2007, 526-527 in particular).

12 Whether the intention is directly or indirectly related to the outcome, is not relevant here (cf. Alston 1988, 260; Audi 2001; Bennett 1990; Frankish 2007; Hieronymi 2006, 48-49; Holyer 1983, 274, 283; Pojman 1986, 180; Price 1954, 16-17; cf. for a religious case of indirect acquisition Pascal 1921). There is also a difference between the psychological and the conceptual impossibility to intentionally acquire beliefs (cf. Alston 1988, 263-268; Pojman 1986): Is it just a matter of fact about human psychology that we cannot intentionally acquire beliefs (if that is the case)? Or are

Intuitively, acquiring and sustaining a belief are two different things. However, given that the question whether someone should sustain a belief arises only if there is the option of giving it up and not holding it, the two cases do not really differ in any sense relevant here. I will therefore use the term “acquire” in a broader sense from now on, covering both “acquire” and “sustain” in the sense used above.<sup>13</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will speak of “intentional acquisition of a belief” rather than of “intentional acquisition of a belief in the absence of any epistemic reasons for it”.

(b) What it Involves

So is it possible to intentionally acquire a belief? Why should one not be able to form the relevant intention and why should that intention not lead to the acquisition of the relevant belief? A problem presents itself as soon as one takes a closer look at the predicament of a subject who is aware of the fact that she has intentionally acquired a certain belief. Such a subject would believe something like the following:

(1) I believe that p in the absence of any epistemic reasons for it

or even

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there conceptual reasons why it might be impossible to do so? I will focus on the second kind of considerations here.

13 Williams 1973 introduced the phrase “deciding to believe” but one should be careful with it since it could be misleading: Deciding to do something is not sufficient for intentionally doing it.

(2) I believe that  $p$  in the absence of any reasons for it.<sup>14</sup>

The subject could also believe something like the following:

(3) I believe that  $p$  but only because I want<sup>15</sup> to.

The subject might even believe

(4) I believe that  $p$  against the evidence.<sup>16</sup>

(4) is very close to being a Moore-paradoxical belief.<sup>17</sup> A subject who holds that the evidence clearly speaks against  $p$  must also hold (at least in normal cases where, e.g., no paradox is being considered, and given some plausible principles about evidence) that the evidence clearly speaks for *not-p*.<sup>18</sup> The belief that the evidence clearly speaks for *not-p* either as such involves or at least leads to the belief that *not-p* (but cf. Owens 2002, 382-384).<sup>19</sup> If all this is true, then we can infer from it together with (4) that the subject (who is aware of all that) also believes:

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14 Let us assume that the speaker uses “reasons” more or less in the sense explained above: in the sense of epistemic or pragmatic reasons.  
 15 I take “want” in a very broad sense here, as covering all kinds of practical “pro”-attitudes.  
 16 - to choose one kind of epistemic reason. Similar things hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other kinds.  
 17 Moore-paradoxicality is shortly mentioned as a problem for voluntarism by: Engel 1999, 19; O’Shaughnessy 1980, 25; Owens 2002, 382-384; Pojman 1986, 170, 172.  
 18 This is not just a necessary condition for being a minimally rational believer. We could not even make sense of someone who sees the first but not the second evidential relation.  
 19 Again, this is not just a rationality condition but formulates a conceptual relation between a belief that the evidence favours  $p$  and the belief that  $p$ . - To be sure, what I am saying here is compatible with the psychological fact that one can stick with a belief that  $p$  even in the light of overwhelming



(5) I believe that p but not-p.

(5), however, is clearly Moore-paradoxical (cf. Moore 1952, 542-543). Even if we only assume that the subject believes that having sufficient evidence against “p” amounts to believing that not-p, we get something problematic:

(6) I believe that p but I do also believe that not-p.

This is a self-attribution of a pair of mutually inconsistent beliefs. Even without the development towards (5) and (6) (4) is already quite problematic. One could call it as well as (1), (2) and (3) “Moore-paradoxical” in a broader sense.<sup>20</sup>

(c) Why it Is Problematic

Why is all this a problem for belief-voluntarism (cf., however, van Fraassen 2002, 89-90)?

First of all, a subject who believes something of the form (1)-(5) would have to count as someone who mistrusts their own belief that p. They hold something crucial against what they take to be their own belief: the lack of epistemic reasons and truth-relatedness. This is crucial because a main point of belief is to capture things as they are, as everyone who

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contrary evidence suggesting that not p. A person in such a condition might have two contradictory beliefs (that p, that not p). What I will argue against here is the idea that a subject could self-ascribe a belief while at the same time acknowledging the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

20 I spare the reader the repetition of this point for the cases (1), (2) and (3). We do not have to go into these details here.

masters the concept of belief knows in some way or other. Now, as Wittgenstein once pointed out (cf. 1958, p.190), one can mistrust one's own senses but not one's own beliefs. This is part of what it is to have a belief. Insofar as one self-ascribes the belief that p, one does not mistrust it.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the subject who assents to (1), (2), (3), (4) or (5) cannot be taken to really believe this: they can either not take themselves to believe that p or they cannot be taken to have the relevant reservation or mistrust. They cannot believe (1), (2), (3), (4) or (5), and all that for conceptual reasons. Since anyone who is aware of the fact that they intentionally acquired a certain belief would have to believe (1), (2), (3), (4) or (5), it is not possible to intentionally acquire a belief in full awareness that one is doing so. And again: all that for conceptual reasons.<sup>22</sup> Here is a slightly different way to make the same point. A subject can only self-attribute a belief (in a de dicto way, like in the case of (1)-(5)) if they master the concept of a belief. Mastery of that concept entails that the subject does not mistrust her own belief. Since beliefs of (1)-(5) constitute such cases of mistrust, one cannot believe any of (1)-(5). Since awareness of intentional acquisition of a belief requires exactly that, such belief at will is not possible.

But so what? Intentional acquisition of a belief need not come with the awareness that the belief was acquired intentionally. The subject might forget that that is how it happened. Or it might never have been conscious of the way the belief came into existence.

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21 It is an interesting question how one should interpret this idea for degrees of belief. To believe that p would mean to have a sufficiently high degree of belief that p (e.g., above .8, just to pick a number). To have, e.g., a .2 degree belief that the belief that p is false, would not count as a case of mistrusting one's beliefs. It is hard to see what could be wrong with that. Rather, mistrust of one's belief that p would have to involve some kind of probabilistic incoherence: for instance, to have .8 degree of belief that p but also to have, say, a .8 degree of belief that the belief that p is false. I cannot pursue this idea further here. Thanks to Darrell Rowbottom and to Chad Mohler for bringing it up in discussion.

22 (6) is a special case. Even if one can believe (6), it would be an extreme case of radical irrationality.

As long as the awareness is lacking, there seems nothing problematic about the intentional acquisition of a belief—except, perhaps, that it requires for its possibility this lack of awareness which could be problematic for some other reason. However, there is nothing conceptually incoherent about that. Intentional acquisition of a belief is possible but only if it happens “in the dark”. It cannot happen with awareness.<sup>23</sup> However, this is still a severe restriction.

We can leave the discussion of belief-voluntarism at that; it has already delivered the material I would like to use for the discussion of van Fraassen's conception of epistemic stances.

## 2. Stance-Voluntarism

### (a) What it Is

Van Fraassen describes himself as an epistemic voluntarist in the broad sense of allowing for an influence of the will on epistemic matters (cf. van Fraassen 2004b, sec.3). One important example he gives is his Reflection Principle of diachronic rationality:

(Reflection)  $P_{a,t}(A / P_{a,t+1}(A) = r) = r$ .

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<sup>23</sup> One can, of course, make an analogous point for cases in which the subject not only unconsciously but also unintentionally acquires a belief but is biased by her own desires and wishes.

A subject *a*'s conditional probability at time *t* for *A*, given that *a*'s probability for *A* at a later time  $t+1 = r$ , ought to equal *r* (cf. 1984, 244). Even if I now have no evidence for *A* which would justify assigning probability of *r* to *A*, I ought to do so if I expect that I will assign that probability to *A* later. The main reason why a person should adhere to (Reflection) is that otherwise a diachronic Dutch Book could be made against them (cf. 1984, 237ff., 240ff.). Van Fraassen characterizes this as voluntaristic because the acceptance of future probabilities is not based on evidence but on a willful commitment to one's future view. The details and problems of van Fraassen's argument for (Reflection) need not concern us here (cf., e.g., Pool 2000).<sup>24</sup> The only point to be raised here is the following one. If (Reflection) is indeed a constraint on rational belief, then adherence to it shouldn't count as "voluntaristic" in the sense relevant here. There is good epistemic reason having to do with probabilistic coherence over time to adhere to it. It is not just a commitment based on non-epistemic reasons or even no reasons at all.

According to van Fraassen (2002, 61-62), a voluntarist accepts that one can acquire or hold a stance for non-epistemic reasons, perhaps even for no reasons whatsoever (cf. also Clarke 1986 for the difference between doxastic and attitude voluntarism). If we model our notion of stance-voluntarism after the notion of belief-voluntarism introduced above we get the following (slightly more specific) explanation: Stance-voluntarism is the thesis that one can intentionally acquire or sustain a stance in the absence of any epistemic

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24 What if I have good reason to believe that my future self will be irrational? And how much trust should we put into Dutch Book arguments anyway (cf., e.g., Schick 1986 and Rowbottom forthcoming)?

reasons for that stance.<sup>25</sup> One might then have it for non-epistemic, pragmatic reasons or for no reasons whatsoever. Stance-voluntarism is a thesis about what is permissible, about what is normatively acceptable. According to van Fraassen, it is fine for an empiricist to take his empiricist stance even if they lack any epistemic reasons for doing so.

(b) What it Involves

First, we must not forget that stances are clusters of different kinds of attitudes, amongst them beliefs (see above). If voluntarism about stances involves voluntarism about all the elements of stances, then it involves voluntarism about beliefs, too. But aren't we back with belief-voluntarism then? Stance-voluntarism would be problematic because of the danger of belief-voluntarism involved (see above). One would, at least, need an argument that shows why stance-voluntarism as such does not entail belief-voluntarism or that the belief-voluntarism involved does not do any or much harm.

Much more important are the parallels between stance-voluntarism and belief-voluntarism (cf. van Fraassen 2002, 89-90). Take an empiricist and her stance as an example. Insofar as she is aware of her stance and the fact that she has no epistemic reasons for it<sup>26</sup> she would believe something like:

(7) I am an empiricist but I have no epistemic reasons to be.

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25 An epistemic reason for a particular epistemic stance would tell us that that stance is the right one for the purposes of inquiry (see the remarks on epistemic projects and activities below).

26 We do not have to deal with more complicated cases here where the person is mistaken about her stance.

She might also believe that

(8) I am an empiricist but only because I want to be,

or even that

(9) I am an empiricist against all epistemic reason,

or

(10) I am an empiricist just like that and for no reason (epistemic or pragmatic) whatsoever.<sup>27</sup>

Whether "I am an empiricist" counts as an expression of a stance here or as a description of a belief (about a stance)-there is something Moore-paradoxical (in a broader sense applicable to states other than belief) about (7)-(10) (cf. a short remark in van Fraassen himself, in 2004b, 173; cf. also Mohler 2007, 213-214, 216 for a similar point in a different context). I am not going to argue-like in the case of belief-voluntarism-that belief in (7)-(10) is conceptually impossible. But it seems that there are close parallels between the two forms of voluntarism and that a person believing or committing herself to any of (7)-(10) is

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<sup>27</sup> The person does not have to put it in the terms of (7)-(10) exactly.

deeply irrational given the crucial fact that the relevant stance here is an epistemic stance concerned with truth, knowledge and inquiry. Why?

(c) Why it Is Problematic

Let us first distinguish between projects and activities on the one side, and stances on the other side. Call an activity or a project an “epistemic activity” or an “epistemic project” just in case its main inherent *telos* or the main goal it is directed at is epistemic in nature, that is dedicated to finding out the truth about something.<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that truth is the only epistemic goal: knowledge, justified belief and some other things also qualify, at least *prima facie*. But since they all seem to have an essential relation to truth, we can make things a bit simpler and just talk about truth-orientation as a condition for an epistemic goal.<sup>29</sup> Call a stance an “epistemic stance” just in case it is adopted with respect to some epistemic activity or project. It is not necessary for some stance being an epistemic one that the stance is truly and fully adequate for the project or activity; what matters here is only that the person adopting the stances adopts it for a particular epistemic purpose and with respect to an epistemic activity or project.

Now, one of the things someone who says or thinks something like (7)-(10) is doing is to call themselves “an empiricist”. Suppose this is meant as a self-ascription and

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28 To account for the possibility that an activity of project might have more than one *telos* or goal, I have included the restriction “main”. It is not necessary to worry about the question here what determines whether some goal is the main goal of a project or activity. There are answers to this question but they aren’t short and would lead us away from our main topic.

29 I have no issues with those who insist that there are “epistemic goals” which are not essentially related to truth (like, e.g., understanding). I am only indicating here how I am using the term “epistemic”.

not so much an expression of an attitude or stance, and suppose further that the person sees her stance as an epistemic stance related to an epistemic project.<sup>30</sup> In that case, it is very hard if not impossible to see how that person could coherently think of her project and her stance as epistemic (in the sense explained above) while at the same time acknowledging that she has no epistemic reasons in favour of her stance. The person sees herself as directed towards a goal of type E and adopts a stance of type E' with respect to that goal but admits that she has no reasons for adopting that stance which would be relevant to that kind of goal. Rationality or coherence would demand that the person either gives up her stance or her view that there are no epistemic reasons in favour of it. It would be Moore-paradoxical (in a broader sense, again) and irrational to stick with both (see above for the parallel point for beliefs). The person would be like someone who wants to prepare an omelette and adopts the attitude of an egg-breaker but holds that there are no omelette-related reasons to adopt that attitude.

What if the person is not self-ascribing being an empiricist to herself but rather expressing the attitude or stance? The same things as above hold here, *mutatis mutandis*. How could someone express a stance while at the same time adding that there are no reasons for taking the stance which would be relevant to the corresponding project or activity? Like an egg-breaker who expresses his attitude towards eggs while adding that this has little if anything to do with the prospects of producing an omelette, the person who sticks with both the expression of the stance and the view about her reasons for adopting

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30 Again, we can disregard cases in which the person is mistaken about her stance or the project or activity she is engaged in or about their epistemic or non-epistemic nature.



that stance would be Moore-paradoxical and irrational. She ought to give up one or the other.

But what if the speaker or thinker of (7)-(10) neither sees her stance nor her project as epistemic ones (in the sense explained above)? The person might even see herself as taking a non-epistemic stance with respect to some non-epistemic activity or project. Consider a simple example. Paul is attending the annual ball of the association of philosophers of science. The empiricists have reserved the best table on the veranda for themselves. Paul wants to sit with them because he likes them and he prefers sitting on the veranda. Therefore he tells the bouncer at the entrance to the veranda about how close he is to the empiricists. His project (to sit on the veranda) or activity (to hang out on the veranda) is not epistemic and neither is his stance (“Be nice to empiricists!”). It seems obvious that we don’t have to worry much about such cases: Empiricism is not just a pragmatic attitude towards some non-epistemic goal – or if it is, our topic becomes obsolete. And van Fraassen does not hold such a radical pragmatism. The same point applies if the stance is being expressed rather than self-ascribed. A person who sees neither her stance nor her project as epistemic would miss something crucial and insofar have to count as irrational or cognitively blameworthy.

What if the person saying or thinking “I am an empiricist” sees her stance as an epistemic one but not her project or activity? Well, according to the explanation above a stance can only be an epistemic one if it is related to an epistemic project or activity. But apart from that, it would be hard to understand why one should adopt a stance if not because it is suited for a specific kind of activity or project? This would be self-defeating

and irrational. Moreover, such a case would not be very interesting in the first place.

Again, the same point applies to the expression rather than self-ascription of the stance.

Much more interesting than the above three cases is the last case of someone who expresses the empirical stance or declares to be an empiricist and sees the project or activity as epistemic (inquiry concerning the truth, etc.) but not the stance. The person would see her stance not as something adopted in the light of her epistemic project or activity. She might, for instance, hold that her stance is just part of the way she is: "Here I stand, I can do no other!" or "Here's my stance, I can adopt no other!". Such a person seems to face a dilemma. Either she sticks with seeing the stance as non-epistemic (or with not seeing it as epistemic) but then it is not clear at all (to say the least) how her stance could be of any relevance to her when it comes to questions concerning inquiry.

Empiricism-even if conceived of as a stance-is related to inquiry. So, how could it then not be an epistemic stance? This is, at least, very unclear. If, however, we want to explain the relevance of a stance for a given epistemic project or activity, then we have to see it as an epistemic stance. In other words, the dilemma is that one cannot have both: the relevance of the stance and no commitment to its epistemic nature. If we want to remain relevant, we should, it seems, see the stance of empiricism as epistemic. This, however, would get us-given the view that there are no epistemic reasons for the stance-back into Moore-Paradoxality and incoherence (as explained above). The same point, again, applies if the stance is being expressed rather than self-ascribed.

## (d) Simplicity, Elegance, and other Values

But perhaps all this is not quite right? Consider scientists who value the degree of simplicity and elegance of a scientific theory very highly, not just its empirical adequacy, truth, explanatory power, etc. Let us assume that there is a “simplicity and elegance”-stance (“se-stance”) and that it does not involve the belief that simplicity or elegance are truth-conducive or truth-indicative. Isn’t this an acceptable case of a non-epistemic stance adopted with respect to an epistemic project or activity? What should be wrong with that, or even incoherent or irrational?<sup>31</sup>

A lot depends on whether such an se-stance is the only stance adopted with respect to the corresponding project or whether it is part of a whole group of different stances. If the first, then there seems indeed to be a problem (see above). But we can disregard this possibility quickly because scientists or inquirers are not (and should not be) only and exclusively interested in simple and elegant theories. Hence, if there are other stances around, we would have to ask whether all of them could be non-epistemic. Again, this assumption seems to lead to problems. It is very implausible to assume that scientists are not (or should not be) interested in truth and lack all epistemic stances. How could the empirical stance be like the se-stance: not an epistemic stance but playing an important role in the epistemic project?

Van Fraassen does not say much about the concrete “ingredients” of the empirical stance. However, whatever we take the empirical stance to be *in concreto* (and there is

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31 One can raise similar points about other values but for the sake of brevity I restrict myself to simplicity and elegance.

certainly room for different versions<sup>32</sup>), there will be a difference between it and, say, the se-stance. The latter can and often is characterized as "aesthetic" or in a similar way and not very closely, if at all, related to values like the value of getting to the truth. However, nothing like that seems adequate in the case of an empirical stance. It is an epistemic stance and therefore will have some essential relation to truth and related things. If, however, one wants to say that the empirical stance is just like the se-stance, aesthetic and all that, then one has only saved empiricism from its problems by turning it into something non-epistemic and very different from the original "item". The prize for solving the problems of empiricism would be identity-loss.

#### (e) The Limits of Voluntarism

The upshot of all this is that no matter what version of stance-voluntarism we choose, there are serious problems. The most interesting versions of it have to face the charge of incoherence and Moore-paradoxality. And that is bad enough for a defender of the idea of stance-voluntarism.<sup>33</sup>

One might object that all this is true only in cases in which the person is aware of her lack of epistemic reasons for her stance. But what if she is not aware of it? One could, it seems, rationally hold on to a stance held for no epistemic reason as long one is not

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32 These different versions might come with different standards for acceptable (epistemic) reasons. However, the crucial point here is how stances are related to epistemic reasons, not so much whether there is variation of standards for reasons between different stances (thanks to a referee here).

33 Van Fraassen 1995, 85 criticizes Carnapian choices of a language as "the paradigm of capricious, irrational, or at least arational behavior." Couldn't, ironically, a similar charge be made against van Fraassen's idea of the adoption of a stance (given the above argument)?

aware of the lack of epistemic reasons. However, the blocking of awareness is itself irrational, especially in the context of a scientific or philosophical discussion of stances. So, this also does not seem to be an option for the defender of stance-voluntarism.<sup>34</sup>

What my argument suggests is that stance-voluntarism is problematic, at least concerning a stance like the empirical stance. It should be seen, I have argued, as an epistemic stance and such stances cannot be "pragmatized" (cf. on a different aspect of this Bueno 2003, 362-363): As epistemic stances they have an essential relation to epistemic projects and activities and therefore also to epistemic reasons. If that connection is cut off, it is not plausible any more that one should call them "epistemic".

The following kind of reply won't help. Stances are attitudes concerning how to deal with the acquisition and processing of beliefs. They are second-order practical attitudes concerning (the acquisition of) first-order beliefs about the world. Even if first-order-belief-voluntarism is problematic, it is not entailed by second-order-attitude-voluntarism. The stance constitutes a framework within which beliefs can be assessed as correct, true or rational. The arbitrariness of a stance or framework is not necessarily inherited by the beliefs resulting from inquiry within that stance or framework.

It is not clear whether this is true. Suppose someone takes the metaphysical stance of only listening to a priori arguments of a certain sort. He doesn't even take empirical arguments concerning, say, the nature of space and time seriously. Aren't his beliefs about the subject matter then also as arbitrary and ill-motivated as his stance? More importantly,

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<sup>34</sup> van Fraassen holds a permissive or broad view of rationality according to which every belief which is not irrational is rationally permitted (cf. van Fraassen 1989, 171; 1995, 71; 2000, 277; 2004a, 129). One might want to apply this to the case of stances but the argument above shows that this would not be convincing.

even if we leave the relation between second-order-attitudes and first-order-beliefs apart, stance-voluntarism still looks very problematic for the reasons explained above having to do with the irrationality of the subject.

#### (f) The Truth in Voluntarism

But there is also an important element of truth in stance-voluntarism. To see it more clearly, let us look at epistemic policies, that is, sets of epistemic goals, values, methods and procedures (cf., e.g., Helm 1994; Heil 1983, 361-362; van Fraassen 2004c, sec.2). We could see such policies as stances of a very special kind (but cf. Lipton 2004, 148 and Teller 2004, sec.4; cf. also van Fraassen 2004b, 178-179 who argues that stances involve more than policies). Think of the two venerable epistemic goals of maximizing the number of true beliefs and minimizing the number of false beliefs about a given subject matter. As is well-known, these two goals or values can get into conflict with each other in the sense that one can only pursue the former if one drops or restricts the latter (van Fraassen 2002, 86-90; James 1963, 204-205; Lipton 2004, 149; for pluralism and conflict of the values of science cf. also Kuhn 1977). This raises the question: Which goal or value is more important (cf., e.g., Riggs 2003)? Probably, the answer is going to be context-specific and complicated, suggesting particular mixes of degrees of truth-seeking and error-avoidance for different kinds of situations. In any case, the answer itself won't be based on epistemic reasons, at least not exclusively. It will have to bring in non-epistemic, pragmatic values: How much does it matter to us whether we're right or wrong about particular subject

matters? How relevant, important or interesting are the truths or falsities in the case given? How important is it to gain an interesting picture of the world which explains something? The answers to these kinds of questions very much depend on our practical interests and attitudes, not so much on anything epistemic.<sup>35</sup>

However, the truth in voluntarism is not the truth of voluntarism. Pragmatic reasons for policies or stances are important but they can only be part of the whole epistemic picture. They are only admissible if they also satisfy the constraints of the particular epistemic project at hand. This is why epistemic reasons play a major role when it comes to stances (like the empirical stance), even if they don't play the only role in our epistemic lives (cf., however, Stich 1990).

### 3. Conclusion

Belief-voluntarism turned out to be false for conceptual reasons (given awareness of the voluntariness). Stance-voluntarism is not false for conceptual reasons but problematic because a "voluntaristic" attitude towards epistemic stances comes with the prize of irrationality and normative inadequacy. This looks like a major problem for van Fraassen's solution to the problem of empiricism. A much more modest version of pragmatism might thus be a good alternative to outright voluntarism. And the case of empiricism as a view might not be as hopeless as van Fraassen thinks. But that is another matter.

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<sup>35</sup> Another aspect I want to mention very briefly here has to do with the criteria for what counts as evidence and the different ways of weighing pieces of evidence against each other (cf. Holyer 1983, 277-278, 279, 283-284; Govier 1976, 643, 653-656; Naylor 1985, 434). The voice of epistemic reasons often remains silent here so that the will can step in (cf. James 1963, 200).

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