

BOOK REVIEWS

The Empirical Stance, by Bas C. van Fraassen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. 304 pages. Cloth \$30.00.

JEFFREY KOPERSKI, Saginaw Valley State University

When news spread that Princeton philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen had embraced Christianity, many theists wondered how his views might change. Empiricists were among theism's main foes in the 20th century. What would now happen to van Fraassen's own brand of "constructive empiricism"? His 1999 Terry Lectures at Yale University, on which this book is based, show that the answer is "not much." Van Fraassen is still a card carrying empiricist and scientific anti-realist. The surprising part is how broadly his epistemological challenges now range.

Van Fraassen begins by lamenting that although speculative metaphysics has been repeatedly beaten down, it continues to rise anew. Many readers of this journal will see that as a good thing; van Fraassen thinks not. The god of the metaphysicians is not the God of Abraham, he says, but rather a harmful construction. Once philosophers begin to expound on the hidden nature of the deity, persons, space, time, etc., those subjects inevitably become distorted. Unlike science, van Fraassen argues, abstract metaphysics lacks external checks making it highly susceptible to error. True, both the theoretician and analytic philosopher (unfortunately) use inference to the best explanation. Both make comparative judgments using explanatory virtues such as simplicity and consistency. But there are important differences. First, when science goes beyond what is observed there is a risk of error, but the payoff makes it worth such risks. Contrast this with metaphysics where the only possible gain is a subjective sense that something has been explained. The risk of error for the metaphysician, he argues, is completely disproportional to this meager benefit. Second, success in science is determined by empirical tests. Over time, theories often fall prey to new data, setting up a kind of natural selection among rival explanations. In contrast, ontologies brush up against the real world only minimally and are too easily perpetuated come what may.

Van Fraassen concludes that, fortunately, philosophy need not be metaphysics. A revitalized empiricism is the centerpiece of what it can be, but what empiricism was and is requires some discussion. (The second of

three appendices includes an interesting history of the term.) The lone thread running through Hume, Comte, and Carnap is their rejection of fundamental explanations, especially those that postulate abstract entities. They see no value in system building, no need for an immaterial realm of truth-makers in order to prop up mathematics, ethics, or science. In addition, van Fraassen argues that empiricists should reject foundationalism. Rationalists demanded that epistemology start from demonstrable truths. Older empiricists answered that experience is the only mechanism for accurate, foundational beliefs. This reply is itself, however, a factual claim about persons. How, van Fraassen asks, would a good empiricist come to discover this fact? Moreover, by the empiricists' own lights, all factual claims are contingent. Wanting to avoid dogmatism about this and all other contingent matters, empiricists had to allow that other theories of knowledge, like rationalism, might be true. It seems, therefore, that classical empiricism cannot effectively undercut rationalism and its bloated ontology while remaining faithful to its own doctrines. Van Fraassen's answer is to reject foundationalism and factual theses about how beliefs are properly formed. His empiricism is not a theory. It is best construed as a philosophical stance or intellectual approach that upholds certain values:

- (i) the rejection of explanation by postulate
- (ii) the primacy of experience over theory
- (iii) the admiration of science, including a view of rationality that allows for disagreement

These are not facts; there are no descriptive claims for how knowledge is gained. Philosophy on this model is more a matter of attitudes and commitments than propositional beliefs about what the world is like.

Van Fraassen argues that this noncognitivist approach is the only one capable of making sense of scientific revolutions. Following a roughly Kuhnian line, before a given "classical" theory runs into real difficulties, any radically different theory seems "incoherent, inconsistent, obviously false or worse" (72). After a revolution, the scientific community is generally able to account for the successes of the abandoned theory in light of the new, noting the underlying continuity between the two. But how, van Fraassen asks, is such a transition possible? A rational person starting at time t_1 believes theory P is true and its rival Q is "literally absurd" (72). That same person at t_2 comes to crisis over P, and eventually adopts Q. But since Q was clearly false at t_1 , movement away from P toward Q would have been irrational.

Instead of embracing irrationality as necessary for theory change, van Fraassen defends an alternative view held by William James. Rationality is the pursuit of "cognitive gain," maximizing truth and avoiding error. Since these goals are in tension, one has to strike a balance. But where the balance should be and whether the risk of error is too great is a value judgment. Logic cannot determine the degree to which one should be open or skeptical. One must simply decide in the context of other goals, interests, and values. On this voluntarist view, rationality cannot compel one to believe a proposition; it merely rules out certain propositions and methods as impermissible.



So when a theory deteriorates sufficiently, one may choose to turn one's attention elsewhere—or not; no particular move is rationally compelled. The scientist may accept any rival that is not irrational from his present point of view. However, if each of the alternatives seems incoherent, van Fraassen argues that new observations alone cannot make them rationally permissible. Dropping the current theory in favor of the preposterous is no solution. There is only one thing in our experience, van Fraassen says, that plays such a transforming role: emotion. Euripides' Medea would never consider harming the children she has had with Jason . . . until he dumps her for another princess. At that point, what had been considered beyond the pale—killing her sons—is now an option to weigh. Dispassionate reason alone, says van Fraassen, cannot trigger such change.

The same goes for science when the cognitive gap between the pre- and post-revolutionary positions is great. Emotion, rather than new facts and logic, bridges the gulf, transforming the irrational into a rationally permissible option. Here van Fraassen's break with standard epistemology is most acute, although his case would be stronger if he could give some plausible examples from the history of science and say a bit more about which emotions play this transforming role. Bayesians will also complain they have been dismissed too quickly. Any theory that does not have a prior probability of zero might become acceptable in light of new data. In short, the argument that emotion is a necessary condition for revolutionary change is weak. So long as a rival theory is logically consistent, more traditional confirmation schemes are able to account for such change, at least in principle.

In van Fraassen's final lecture, he acknowledges that empiricists have often been hostile toward religion. He argues that this is due to the conflation of science and the secular. The empiricists' ideal science "objectifies" nature, which among other things means relying only on publicly accessible properties. Scientists must decide which properties and what sorts of why-questions are relevant to their inquiry and which are out of bounds. Van Fraassen stresses that these self-imposed limits, although fruitful, suggest that there are other forms of rational pursuit as well. Secularization is the false view that this objectifying stance is a necessary condition for all rational inquiry, ignoring that objectification comes at a price. The secular inquirer reduces the powerful images and experiences of religion to how things seem to others. 'Johnson perceives the presence of God' is too subjective. The claim is therefore replaced by third-person descriptions of what the native practitioner believes to be the presence of God. The fallacy is in thinking that once the sociological why-questions have been answered the subject has been exhausted, as if there is nothing more to religion—and ethics, aesthetics, etc.—than its analyzed, objectified parts. The secularist fails to see that the power, astonishment, and awe of religious experience has been operationalized away.

Van Fraassen's alternative is to encourage the scientific study of religion, but firmly maintain that there is wonder and a call to decision that remains after the analysis. Once all the data and theorizing are done, how ought one now live? What is the challenge to one's values and orientation to life? These are the vital questions that remain. We must also come to grips with the notion of personhood, he goes on to say, but not in the tradi-

tional metaphysical sense. The question ought not be framed in terms of the mind-body problem; it is instead an ethical and existential question. Is this entity a person? Many Nazis answered 'no' in the case of Jews. Those who disagree do not do so based on privileged access to facts and knowledge. Declaring that something is a person expresses a decision, a commitment to treat that being in a certain way.

Very well, but can one be *wrong* about such decisions? Van Fraassen's answer is pragmatic, "Of course; there are conditions under which we will revise a judgment. That revision would then imply the belief that they were never persons at all" (191). Yes, but the question isn't whether under different circumstances one might have believed otherwise. Could one affirm that *p* and yet not-*p* be the case? He treats this as Carnap treated all "external" questions: framed in a hopelessly realist fashion, it ought not be entertained. The same goes for philosophical theology: "Encounter with the divine does not mean . . . contemplation of a theoretically postulated hypothesis of which neither science nor we ourselves have any need" (193). What about such theological hypotheses as the trinity and incarnation? Assume these have positive value in shaping the Christian's religious stance. If so, a Christian empiricist might very well use these constructs, but van Fraassen seems to have left no room for actually believing such doctrines to be true. It seems to me the empiricist is just as likely to dismiss these ancient creedal notions along with angels, demons, and supernatural intervention, which he rejects as the mythology of ancient folk (186).

Although it has not emerged in this review, themes from Continental philosophy and theology are often used for the sake of illustration. Without some knowledge of existentialism, the reader will find parts of the book rather puzzling. Van Fraassen's strength is in his challenge to epistemology; however, his own proposals are often vague. That's to be expected in a work aimed at a general audience, but the philosophical reader looking for van Fraassen's best arguments may be disappointed.

Radical Interpretation in Religion, edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi, 232. £17.95 (paper).

PHILIP L. QUINN, University of Notre Dame

This volume collects papers that were written for a conference on Radical Interpretation in Religion that was sponsored by Dartmouth College and held in October 2000. The conference was organized to honor Hans H. Penner, who was, before his retirement in 2001, Kelsey Professor of Religion at Dartmouth. The editor has divided the volume into three parts. The first, whose title is "Pragmatics," contains papers by Terry F. Godlove Jr., Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty and Wayne L. Proudfoot. The second, which is entitled "Culture and Cognition," includes papers by Catherine M. Bell, E. Thomas Lawson and Maurice Bloch. And the third, which bears