

# A Defense of “Naïve” Empiricism: It is Neither Self-Refuting nor Dogmatic

Stephen P. Schwartz  
Ithaca College

## 1 Objections to Empiricism

A standard objection to empiricism is that it is self-refuting. Allied with this objection is the claim that empiricists cannot avoid engaging in the sort of metaphysics they eschew. By rejecting metaphysics empiricists are supposedly engaging in dogmatic metaphysics. The logical positivists tried to avoid the latter objection by wielding the infamous “verifiability criterion of meaningfulness.” Alas, while perhaps avoiding the metaphysics objection, the verifiability criterion fell victim to the self-refutation objection. The verifiability criterion is now defunct and of only historical interest.<sup>1</sup> Bereft of the verifiability criterion empiricists still must face the twin objections.

A classical source of these objections, cited by Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* as showing the need for the verifiability criterion, is F.H. Bradley. In the introduction to *Appearance and Reality* Bradley accuses the anti-metaphysician of being a dogmatic fellow metaphysician.

The man who is ready to prove that metaphysical knowledge is wholly impossible ... is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles. ...To say that reality is such that our knowledge cannot reach it, is a claim to know reality; to urge that our knowledge is of a kind which must fail to transcend appearance, itself implies that transcendence. For, if we had no idea of a beyond, we should assuredly not know how to talk about failure or success. And the test, by which we distinguish them, must obviously be some acquaintance with the nature of the goal. Nay, the would-be skeptic, who presses on us the contradictions of our thoughts, himself asserts dogmatically. (1883, pp. 1-2)

Another classical source of the self-refuting (and thus dogmatic) objection is due to a friend of empiricism, Bertrand Russell:

I will observe, however, that empiricism, as a theory of knowledge, is self-refuting. For, however it may be formulated, it must involve some general proposition about the dependence of knowledge upon experience; and that any such proposition, if true, must have as a consequence that itself cannot be known. While, therefore, empiricism may be true, it cannot, if true, be known to be so. (1940, p. 207)

Contemporary versions of these objections have been argued most vigorously by Bas van Fraassen. Although he couches it with more panache, van Fraassen makes

basically the same points as Bradley and Russell. Van Fraassen accuses the tendentiously titled "naive empiricist" with being dogmatic. Here is the heart of van Fraassen's argument:

There must then be some statement E+ such that

(NE) To be an empiricist = to believe that E+ (the empiricist dogma).  
The mnemonic name "(NE)" stands for "Naive Empiricism." (2002, p.42)

A candidate for E+ could be something like "Experience is the one and only source of information." (2002, p. 43)

Unfortunately, since E+ is the dogma that sums up the entire basis of this empiricism, it is also the sole basis for any empiricist critique of metaphysics. It follows now that by the empiricist's own lights, any empiricist critique can therefore be legitimately countered as follows: "The target of your critique is a claim contrary to E+, hence equally admissible as a hypothesis and not to be ruled out from the outset." There is now either no longer any bite to the critique, or else it bites its own tail. (2002, p. 46)

I understand van Fraassen's charge that "naive" empiricism either has no bite or bites its own tail to be that either empiricism cannot effectively attack metaphysics or is itself engaged in metaphysics. Van Fraassen explains his rather dubious metaphor in the following passages:

Suppose empiricists rest their critique on any factual thesis about what we are like or what the world is like. What should they do, then, if a metaphysician disagrees with that thesis? Empiricists say, "Disagreement among us is always possible and always allowed; let us both explore the factual hypotheses we favor." But if this is their response to the metaphysician, they are then and thereby giving up on the idea of a radical critique of metaphysics. (2002, pp. 43-44)

If the empiricists' position consists,...., in the assertion or belief of a factual thesis, then they have no way to demur from the very sort of metaphysics they typically attack. This is modern empiricism's second, and I think much more serious, disaster. (2002, p. 46)

## 2 The Fundamental Principle of Empiricism

Carl Hempel in his definitive article on the empiricist criterion of meaningfulness (the verifiability criterion) formulates the basic principle of empiricism. "The fundamental principle of modern empiricism is the view that all non-analytic knowledge is based on experience." (1950, p. 41) Here we have van Fraassen's empiricist E+ principle—the one he claims cannot work. Hempel correctly points out that this principle does not entail the verifiability criterion, so the defeat of the verifiability criterion does not automatically mean that we must give up the fundamental principle of empiricism; but if the accusations of Bradley, Russell, and van Fraassen are correct and the fundamental principle of empiricism is in fact an objectionable dogmatic metaphysical principle or if it is self-refuting, then empiricism

is untenable. If so, then perhaps the only road is to treat empiricism as a proposal or stance as van Fraassen urges (2002).<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately the empiricist has a cogent reply to these objections although not one that empiricists have hitherto resorted to, except obliquely.<sup>3</sup> I propose to defend the claim that the fundamental principle of empiricism is an empirical hypothesis, and can be advanced in a way that avoids the objections that empiricism is self-refuting or engaged in dogmatic metaphysics. Van Fraassen’s objections notwithstanding, consistent with empirical principles, empiricism is an empirical theory that does not “lose its bite or bite its own tail.” Once we see that the objections of dogmatism and self-refutation have no bite, we can ask the question whether the fundamental principle of empiricism has strong empirical support and is worthy of our allegiance. I will answer that it does and is.

First, Hempel’s statement of the fundamental principle of empiricism needs some clarification.<sup>4</sup> Hempel’s statement suggests but does not entail that *analytic* knowledge is not based on experience. Modern empiricists following Russell, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* held that mathematics, logic, and geometry are analytic or tautological and that analytic propositions do not represent full-bodied knowledge; they do not represent any matters of fact beyond the meanings of terms or conventions about their meanings. The logical positivists claimed that mathematics, although fascinating and surprising, is not substantial and knowledge of mathematical truths is not knowledge of substantial matters, not knowledge of matters of fact. The idea is that analytic propositions are purely formal or non-substantive and thus are no threat to empiricism. The positivists’ claims about mathematics being analytic may not be correct; there may be no analytic propositions; or the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions may be bogus. While each of these claims has been the subject of intense debate, all of this is irrelevant to the purpose at hand. The point is that we are interested in non-analytic knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This is what modern empiricists and their modern opponents are contending about. Clearly Hempel was intending by the phrase “non-analytic knowledge” to exclude knowledge of basic logic, mathematics, geometry, and seemingly purely trivial, conventional, or formal props like “January has 31 days,” “All grandmothers have had children,” and so on from the sweep of the fundamental principle of empiricism. Also he would probably exclude claims such as “Nothing can be both red and green all over at the same time” which can plausibly be given a somewhat formal treatment (Putnam 1956, 1957). Empiricists can give the rationalists *a priori* (i.e. non-experiential) knowledge of these sorts of propositions as long as *a priori* knowledge does not extend beyond these; in particular as long as *a priori* knowledge does not extend to substantive propositions such as that an omniscient, omnipotent God exists or each human being has an immortal soul. For rationalism to offer a defeating challenge to empiricism some substantive non-analytic propositions would have to be knowable *a priori*. This is what empiricists deny. Empiricists, at least those that follow Hempel, hold that all substantive knowledge is based on experience. I do not think that Hempel would be troubled if all the opponents of empiricism could come up with as knowable *a priori* are logic, mathematics, and propositions such as the formal ones cited above, even if the explanation of the *a prioricity* of these is not precisely that offered by the logical positivists.<sup>6</sup>

“Based on experience” is itself an unclear and metaphorical phrase and empiricists have disagreed about how to understand it. Clearly Hempel means by “experience” “sensory experience, memory, and experience of our own conscious mental states” but beyond that not much is clear. Despite disagreements among

modern empiricists about these issues, there is agreement that certain supposed sources of knowledge are illusory. In particular, according to modern empiricists there is no possibility of substantive knowledge based on pure intellectual intuition, pure reason, recollection of platonic forms, mystical insight, or anything that is claimed to be entirely independent of the senses, memory of past sensory experiences, and introspection into our own mental contents.

If no possible sensory experience, observation, experiment, survey, or outcome of any empirical scientific procedure could provide evidence against a claim, then that claim is not based on experience.<sup>7</sup> We do not need for our purposes to arrive at a more precise definition of “based on experience.” Let us call sensory experiences, observations, experiments, surveys, and outcomes of any scientific procedure “empirical sources of knowledge.” If no possible sensory experience, observation, experiment, survey, or outcome of any scientific procedure, could provide evidence against a claim then it is not based on empirical sources of knowledge—it is not based on experience. The fundamental principle of empiricism is the claim that there are no non-empirical sources of non-analytic knowledge. Or equivalently: “All sources of non-analytic knowledge are empirical.”

From the fundamental principle of empiricism we get something like the verifiability criterion only it is an epistemological criterion of knowledge or rather criterion of knowability and it is entailed by the fundamental principle. As an epistemological criterion it is not subject to defeat by the standard objections to the semantic verifiability criterion of meaningfulness. The empiricist criterion of knowledge can be formulated as follows: “No non-analytic proposition that is independent of empirical sources of knowledge can be known to be true or known to be false.” In order to be faithful to the empiricists’ fundamental principle we should understand the empiricist criterion of knowledge as leaving no room for rational belief or rational disbelief in any non-analytic proposition that is not based on empirical sources of knowledge. The fundamental claim of modern empiricism—that there are no non-empirical sources of knowledge—should be understood to mean that there is no possibility of any non-empirical evidence for or against any non-analytic proposition. So the empiricist criterion of knowledge should be understood to assert that there is no possibility of even the tiniest shred of evidence or support for or evidence against any proposition that is not empirical evidence or support. Any non-analytic proposition that is completely immune to support or undermining by empirical evidence is immune to any and all support or undermining.

### **3 Empirical Empiricism**

Although Hempel nowhere asserts this, in order to avoid the fatal objections of self-refutation and dogmatism we must insist that the fundamental principle of empiricism is an empirical hypothesis and thus that the empiricist criterion of knowability is empirical as well. I also claim, somewhat more hesitantly, that these empirical claims are well supported by empirical evidence, and thus that empiricism not only avoids the objections that it is self-refuting and engaged in metaphysics, but also that empiricism is correct. Empiricism is a true empirical theory.

The empirical support for the fundamental principle of empiricism is diffuse but salient. Our common empirical experience and experimental psychology offer evidence that humans do not have any capacity to garner knowledge<sup>8</sup> except by empirical sources. The fact is that we believe that there is no source of knowledge,

information, or evidence apart from observation, empirical scientific investigations, and our sensory experience of the world, and we believe this on the basis of our empirical *a posteriori* experiences and our general empirical view of how things work. For example, we believe on empirical evidence that humans are continuous with the rest of nature and that we rely like other animals on our senses to tell us how things are. If humans are more successful than other animals, it is not because we possess special non-experiential ways of knowing, but because we are better at cooperating, collating, and inferring. In particular we do not have any capacity for substantive *a priori* knowledge. There is no known mechanism by which such knowledge would be made possible. This is an empirical claim.

Granted, most of the evidence for the fundamental principle of empiricism is negative. Among this negative evidence is the fact that rationalists have never offered any acceptable explanation for how human beings might get substantive *a priori* knowledge (or non-substantive *a priori* knowledge for that matter). Even such a friend of the *a priori* as Christopher Peacocke admits that there is no explanation for our supposed *a priori* knowledge of the propositions he offers as examples:

It is often clear that a proposition is *a priori*, while the nature of the justification or entitlement for belief in the proposition remains unclear. When this combination obtains, it is a task for a philosophical theorist of the *a priori* to explain what the justification or entitlement is.... The identification of the full nature of the entitlement that sustains *a priori* knowledge, as opposed to its existence, is an open question in almost all the domains mentioned above. (2005, p. 746)

In the absence of such an explanation the *a priori* status of the claims is questionable at best.<sup>9</sup> “The domains mentioned above” consist of branches of mathematics and logic plus moral principles, principles of economics, metaphysical assertions, and claims about the impossibility of color sharing, and so on. If the best a friend of the substantive *a priori* can do is point to supposed examples of substantive *a priori* claims and admit that he has no explanation of how we come to them, then we can reasonably question his examples. In the same essay and elsewhere Peacocke gives what he calls a metasemantic account of *a priority* in which *a priority* is based on the possession conditions for concepts. Although he calls his position moderate rationalism, I do not see how this differs from versions of empiricism. An empiricist need not deny that concepts give rise to *a priori* propositions. Indeed, Peacocke insists that his view is consistent with Quinean naturalism, so I am inclined to view the dispute as partially terminological and not threatening to moderate empiricism.<sup>10</sup>

As further evidence of our lack of nonempirical sources of knowledge we can cite the fact that outside of the areas of mathematics, logic, and geometry, there is no agreement on any substantive claim that is independent of empirical sources of knowledge. In the history of philosophy we have the spectacle of classical rationalists<sup>11</sup> asserting many propositions on the basis of their pure rational or philosophical insight and using this as support for their claim that humans have the capacity for pure rational insight while at the same time other rationalists disagree with them about almost everything they assert on this basis—except for the claim that what we conceive clearly and distinctly is true in the way we conceive it. The fact that philosophers and others have never been able to agree at all about *a priori* metaphysical claims is empirical evidence that we do not have the capacity for such knowledge that the rationalists claim we do.

BonJour (1998), who styles himself a moderate rationalist, argues that there must be *a priori* knowledge because without it no knowledge beyond what is immediately observable would be possible. Since there is such knowledge, we must have *a priori* knowledge. However, as admitted by BonJour, this only establishes that we have *a priori* knowledge of principles of reasoning and inference. As already conceded, the moderate empiricist can (and probably must) admit that basic logic and mathematics are *a priori*. The interesting issue between the rationalist and the empiricist is whether *a priori* knowledge extends beyond these formal realms. In order to establish that we have access to substantive *a priori* knowledge rationalists would need to provide answers to three questions: 1. What is the mechanism? 2. Why is there no wide agreement? 3. What reliable methods of reaching agreement are available where there is disagreement? Lacking satisfying answers to these three questions leaves rationalism without any visible means of support. BonJour’s favorite example of an *a priori* claim apprehended by pure reason is that no object can be wholly red and wholly green at the same time. Aside from questions about whether this claim is in fact substantive,<sup>12</sup> BonJour in order to make his position even remotely plausible must explain in what sense the claim that no object can be wholly red and wholly green is substantive, and if so *a priori*, and what the mechanism is that explains our putative ability to grasp this fact by “pure rational insight” as BonJour claims we do. (See in this connection Crane (2003) and Devitt (2005). Quoted in note #8.)

The existence of empirical support for the fundamental principle of empiricism has also been questioned. Van Fraassen (1995, pp. 74 and 79), in his argument against the sort of “naive empiricism” I am expounding, claims that an empirical investigation of the fundamental principle of empiricism is not worth a penny of grant money. He argues that it is not a genuinely testable empirical claim or if testable is too restricted to be of any use to the empiricist. He imagines trying to test the hypothesis by putting people in sensory deprivation chambers and so on. I’m inclined to agree with van Fraassen that testing the hypothesis is not worth a penny of grant money and that testing in cognitive science labs would be useless,<sup>13</sup> but consider that most of our deeply held empirical beliefs are like that. Would you spend grant money testing whether tigers are quadrupedal? But according to Kripke that is an empirical claim that conceivably could be empirically falsified. Likewise consider the claim that there is not a copy of the Manhattan phone book at the exact center of the Sun. Certainly we believe this to be true, but is it testable? We have vast numbers of deeply held empirical views about things and how the world is and works that are not directly testable, nor need they be. Nevertheless they are empirical and ultimately based on sensory observation; they are certainly not *a priori* or based on pure reason. The fundamental principle of empiricism is another one of these, or at least it should be. Consider another example: Suppose we see a magician perform a trick, such as David Blaine with his “Street Magic.” He accosts a total stranger on the street. Asks her to pick a card at random from a deck. She picks the card, notes what it is and puts it back in the deck, then Blaine asks her to look behind her. There the card (or one just like it?) is taped to the inside of a window of a nearby shop. (I have seen videos of this and similar tricks.) We may not have any idea how this is performed, but one thing we do know, or at least believe, is that it is not done by magic. It is not done by any force unknown to science. Whatever the explanation is—slight of hand, collusion, or whatever—it is perfectly ordinary. It is not done by occult powers. And we know this, or at least believe it, not dogmatically, but empirically although again this would not be worth an investigation. Nor is our belief absolutely immune to

revision. It is an ordinary empirical belief—like the belief that we do not have powers of knowledge that exceed the sensory.

Empirical empiricism so construed may be naïve, but it can also be moderate or minimal as well. An empiricist need not be committed to epistemic foundationalism or views about the translatability of all meaningful concepts into sensory terms, or that all knowledge reduces to my sense data. The supposed refutations of empiricism offered by Bradley, Russell, and van Fraassen are not aimed at classical individualistic empiricism, but are directed at a more common sense “naïve” social and intersubjective naturalistic empiricism of the sort I am arguing for here. Certainly a moderate or minimal empiricist can and perhaps should insist on some version of Quinean holism, the Quine-Duhem Thesis, epistemic pragmatism and so on. Even though the only evidence available to us for any hypothesis is empirical evidence, empirical evidence need not be the only reason to accept or reject an hypothesis. Hypotheses that are equally supported could be accepted or rejected on the basis of extra-empirical virtues and I see no reason why extra-empirical virtues cannot always play a role in hypothesis acceptance or rejection. Nor is a moderate empiricist restricted to a narrow construal of evidence. According to empiricism an hypothesis that is immune to any empirical evidence is not rationally acceptable or rejectable, but a moderate empiricist can admit many sorts of empirical evidence including common sense (i.e. our general empirical ideas about how the world works), inference to the best explanation, and induction. These may give only weak empirical support but we are not demanding certainty.

#### **4 Response to the Objections**

Contrary to Russell, empiricism construed as an empirical theory is not self-refuting. The fundamental principle of empiricism is an empirical hypothesis for which as we have seen there is a great deal of support. Furthermore many of us, including me, believe this principle on the basis of our empirical experience, observation, and empirical understanding of how the world and we work. If we demand certainty for knowledge, Russell is correct that empiricism “...cannot, if true, be known to be so,” but knowledge of the fundamental principle of empiricism is not necessary to avoid self-refutation. All that is required is that the fundamental principle of empiricism be an empirical hypothesis, and that it is.

Nor is the naïve empiricist forced into engaging in the sort of dogmatic metaphysics he rejects as Bradley and van Fraassen argue. The empiricist is forced into controversy with the anti-empirical metaphysician but this controversy is strictly empirical. To deny the fundamental principle of empiricism the metaphysician must claim that it is false: he must claim that there are non-empirical sources of knowledge, but this also is an empirical claim that has been defended on empirical grounds by anti-empiricists. Kurt Gödel argued that our capacity for mathematics demonstrates that humans can “perceive” abstract eternal objects as clearly as we perceive physical objects. More recently Noam Chomsky has argued for a version of Cartesian rationalism based on innate ideas. His evidence for his theory of innate ideas is empirical. That humans do not have any sources of non-empirical knowledge is an empirical hypothesis and the person who would deny it should present evidence as such against it. Since the fundamental principle of empiricism is an empirical claim, it is subject to empirical refutation. Perhaps we will discover that the classical

rationalists, or moderate contemporary rationalists such as Peacocke and Bonjour, or Gödel, and Chomsky are right and that humans properly trained or stimulated do have the capacity for some sort of rational insight, or a capacity for pure thought that can be marshaled in such a way as to generate substantive *a priori* knowledge, or that there are innate ideas or universal innate knowledge. Such a capacity would have to be empirically established and objectively verified. There would have to be wide agreement of the sort that other verified empirical claims enjoy; most importantly there would have to be an explanatory mechanism. We cannot now rule out such a discovery, but at present the fundamental principle of empiricism has more in favor of it than against it. In any case, and to repeat the response to the central issue: In defending the fundamental principle of empiricism, the empiricist is engaging in discussion with the metaphysician, but this discussion is and must be empirical in nature, not metaphysical in any sense dangerous to the empiricist. Thus contrary to van Fraassen the naive empiricist is not forced into metaphysics in any damaging sense.

Although empiricism construed as an empirical theory does not fall victim to the two standard objections, perhaps circularity is now a problem. Supporting empiricism empirically might seem to involve circular reasoning. Aren't I presupposing empiricism to support empiricism? Not exactly. The argument would be circular only if it presupposed the fundamental principle of empiricism, but it does not. All that it supposes is that the fundamental principle of empiricism can be supported by and undermined by empirical investigations and evidence. That there are no non-empirical sources of non-analytic knowledge is an empirical claim comparable to the claim that the Sun has eight major planets or that the Earth has only one natural satellite. The fundamental principle of empiricism is just another empirical claim, according to my view, and unless the anti-empiricist rejects all empirical claims and any possibility of empirical support for any claims, he or she must confront the fundamental principle of empiricism empirically. This, of course, has been and is being done as I illustrated in the preceding paragraph.

## 5 Rejection of Metaphysics

We have seen that moderate naive empiricism does not bite its own tail. But does it have any bite? Has the empiricist so weakened his position that any view or claim no matter how metaphysical gets admitted as licit? Certainly moderate empirical empiricism is not as virulently anti-metaphysical as the logical positivists were, nor is there any reason to be. Again, contrary to van Fraassen the empiricist need not field a “...radical critique of metaphysics.” A moderate critique of metaphysics will do just fine. A moderate empiricist need not be an enemy of all metaphysics. Much of traditional philosophy is rationally believable or disbelievable, because it is subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. For example, Cartesian dualism is undermined by advances in neurophysiology; Locke's claims that no ideas or principles are innate in the mind are challenged by Chomsky on the basis of empirical linguistics; Hegel's claim that the Prussian state was the end of history was another casualty on the Western Front in 1918; many of Marx's assertions have turned out to be empirically false; Nietzsche's analysis of slave and master morality is based on historical documents. And so on. Nevertheless there are limits. I suppose if we trolled the deep waters of Plato, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel, not to

mention Bergson, Whitehead, and Bradley, we would find claims that are absolutely independent of any empirical challenge whatsoever and that are presented as such by the philosophers themselves. Any such claims cannot be rationally believed or disbelieved according to moderate empirical empiricism.

Nor need we only look to historical figures to find examples of non-empirical metaphysical claims. Following Kripke’s seminal works (1971 and 1980) many philosophers were given to talk of alternative possible worlds. This metaphysics reached its most developed form in the works of David Lewis, especially Lewis 1986. Metaphysical questions can be raised and answers proposed to them that are not about physical or natural possibilities nor are they about logical possibility. For example, Lewis raises the question of whether there is a possible world in which there are talking donkeys. Presumably this is not physically or naturally possible nor is Lewis asking whether the proposition “There is a talking donkey” is logically possible. That is too easy, since a proposition is logically possible as long as it does not entail an explicit contradiction. Lewis is asking a purely metaphysical question. In fact, Lewis claims that we know that there is a possible world in which there is a talking donkey. I claim that we can know no such thing if it is meant in the way that Lewis intends this claim. We can know empirically that a talking donkey is impossible given our natural laws and ways of nature, and we can know that a talking donkey is logically possible given our knowledge of classical logic. We cannot know, or at least naïve empiricism would entail that we cannot know the answer to the question asked in the way Lewis intends it.<sup>14</sup> Other philosophers are given to asking similar questions. Could Aristotle have turned into a toadstool? “Aristotle turned into a toadstool when he was twenty-seven years old and lived as a toadstool until he died at ninety-five” is logically possible. However “Aristotle turned into a toadstool when he was twenty-seven years old and lived as a toadstool until he died at ninety-five” is not physically possible. There is no physically way in which a human being turns into a toadstool. Of course, this is an empirical hypothesis based on the apparent empirical fact that human beings cannot, physically, turn into toadstools. There is no physical mechanism by which that could occur. Now is there a metaphysical possible world in which Aristotle turned into a toadstool when he was twenty seven years old and lived as a toadstool until he died at ninety five? If we answer “No!” (or “Yes!”) we have a claim that is non-empirical. There is no possibility of empirical evidence for or against the claim that there is a possible world in which Aristotle turned into a toadstool when he was twenty seven years old and lived as a toadstool until he died at ninety five. Thus there is no rational reason to believe or disbelieve it. Philosophers do make such claims or similar ones. For example, Penelope Mackie (2007) claims that Aristotle could have been a toadstool throughout his entire existence. She is not claiming that this is physically possible, nor merely that it is logically possible.<sup>15</sup> She claims that it is a metaphysical possibility in the *de re* sense that Aristotle that very man could have been a toadstool for his entire existence. On the contrary, I claim that only three things are knowable about (rationally assertible or deniable about) “Aristotle is (or was) a toadstool”: it is empirically false, it is physically (or causally) impossible, and it is logically possible. Nothing else.

In fact, we do not have to go to such extremes to find claims that are non-empirical. Even the sorts of claims that Kripkians were fond of are non-empirical; for example, the claim that Aristotle being male could not have been female throughout his entire existence. Again, this is not meant to be an empirical claim at all, nor a claim that the statement “Aristotle being male could not have been female throughout his entire existence” is merely logically possible.<sup>16</sup>

If we were to embrace moderate empirical empiricism, as I would propose, we would have grounds for rejecting all such *de re* metaphysical propositions about other possible worlds. Scientists, our experience and observation, tell us what is physically possible or impossible, and logicians tell us what is logically possible or impossible. There is no work for metaphysicians to do.

What about intuition? As an empiricist I hold that there can be only two acceptable sources of intuition—empirical, in which case its deliverances would be supportable by empirical evidence—or purely formal in which case it will issue in formal or linguistic propositions. There is no such thing as pure intellectual intuition of the truth or falsity of metaphysical claims—no known mechanism by which humans could accomplish such feats of intellection. Of course, this is an empirical claim. I suppose that empiricism of the sort I am proposing would allow a sort of descriptive metaphysics reminiscent of that pursued by Peter Strawson, but that is only because it is not metaphysics. Rather Strawson (1963, p. xii.) characterizes descriptive metaphysics as about our thought. “Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world...” As Ryle (1960, p. 114) pointed out in a discussion with Strawson: “What is commonly expected of a metaphysician is that he should assert the existence or occurrence of things unseen and give for these assertions purely philosophical or conceptual reasons. If he is not an ontologist he is not a metaphysician.” The bite of moderate naïve empiricism is that it rejects as cognitively inaccessible any such metaphysical claims about “things unseen.” There are plenty of them both in historical philosophy and in contemporary analytic metaphysics—e.g. Lewis’s claims about possible worlds.

As moderate empiricists we have no need to be committed to a criterion of meaningfulness that rejects non-empirical metaphysical claims as semantically or cognitively meaningless. Rather, here I am in agreement with van Fraassen.

The unfortunate negative verdict forced on us by this second line of reasoning, which grants sufficiency to such lenient standards, is that it is very easy, all too easy, to make sense. We can sit in our closets and in a perfectly meaningful way, kneading and manipulating language, create new theories of everything and thereby important contributions to ontology. In other words, to put it a little more bluntly, this "world play" we engaged in here is but idle word play; although shown to be meaningful, it is merely idle word play nevertheless. (2002, p. 27)

Recognizing the barrenness of idle word-play, we should dispense with non-empirical metaphysics and return to a moderate empiricist epistemology. The advantages of the empiricist approach are manifold. 1)It is in tune with but not subservient to our noble British empiricist heritage. 2)It avoids the epistemological problems of metaphysical intuition. Natural scientists tell us what is physically or naturally possible, and logicians, purely formally, tell us what is logically possible. 3)For all counterfactual reasoning in real life physical and logical modalities will suffice; we need not confuse ourselves with endlessly debatable metaphysical questions. We need logical possibility for the concept of valid argument and we need physical modalities for things like fixing blame and knowing what to regret, admire, and for interpreting counterfactual claims, but I do not see that we need metaphysical modalities for anything.

David Lewis (1986, p. 4) argues for belief in metaphysical possibilities on analogy with belief in sets in mathematics. “Their [mathematicians] thesis of plurality of sets is fruitful; that gives them good reason to believe that it is true.” “As

the realm of sets is for mathematicians, so logical space is a paradise for philosophers. We have only to believe in the vast realm of *possibilia* and there we find what we need to advance our endeavors." "Modal realism is fruitful; that gives us good reason to believe that it is true." But fruitful for what endeavors? Metaphysics? This surely is dubious support for belief in metaphysical entities. Belief in auras may be useful, indeed indispensable for some New Age theory, but that hardly suggests that we should embrace belief in auras. A full discussion of mathematics would take us too far afield at this point, but I suppose that acceptance of sets rests on their usefulness to mathematics which is itself indispensable for empirical science. The question at hand is the dispensability of metaphysics. If metaphysics turns out to be indispensable in the way that mathematics and natural science are, then that would give support in the way Lewis claims for belief in entities that are useful for metaphysics. There is no need to point out that this is far from being so.

Where, then, does the construal of empiricism as empirical leave contemporary analytic metaphysics? Many of us have been suffering from metaphysical intoxication for the last thirty years or so, mainly brought on by the work of Kripke, Lewis, and others. We've had a ball these last thirty years with metaphysics, now it's time to return to our senses.

## References

- Benjamin, A.C. (1941). Is empiricism self-refuting. *Journal of Philosophy*, 38, pp. 564-573
- Boghossian, P. (1996). Analyticity reconsidered. *Nous*, 30, pp. 360-391.
- BonJour, L. (1998). *In Defense of Pure Reason*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press)
- Bradley, F.H. (1893). *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co)
- Cassam, Q. (2000). Rationalism, Empiricism, and the *a priori*. (In P. Boghossian & C. Peacocke (Eds.), *New Essays on the A priori* (pp. 43-64). Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.)
- Crane, T. (2003). Review of *In Defense of Pure Reason* by Laurence BonJour. *Mind*, vol. 112, no. 447, July, 2003, pp. 502-506
- Devitt, M. (2005). Reply to BonJour. (In E. Sosa & M. Steup (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (pp. 118-120). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.)
- Gibson, R. (1995). Quine on the naturalizing of epistemology. (In P. Leonardi & M. Santambrogio (Eds.), *On Quine: New Essays* (pp. 89-103). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Gupta, A. (2006). *Empiricism and Experience*. (New York: Oxford University Press)

- Hempel, C. (1965). Empiricist criteria of cognitive significance: Problems and changes" (in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (pp. 101-122) New York: The Free Press)
- Hempel, C. (1950). Problems and changes in the empiricist criterion of meaning. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 11, pp. 41-63
- Kripke, S. (1971). Identity and necessity. (In M.K. Munitz (Ed.), *Identity and Individuation* (pp. 135-164). New York: New York University Press)
- Kripke, S. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd.)
- Mackie, P. (2007). *How Things Might Have Been: Individuals, Kinds, and Essential Properties*. (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Mohler, C. (2007). The dilemma of empiricist belief. (In B. Monton (Ed.), *Images of Empiricism: Essays on Science and Stances, with a Reply from Bas C. van Fraassen* (pp. 209-228). Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Musgrave, A. (1977). Logicism revisited. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 28, pp. 99-127
- Peacocke, C. (1988). The limit of intelligibility: a post-verificationist proposal. *The Philosophical Review*, XCVII, pp. 463-496.
- Peacocke, C. (2005). The *a priori*. (Chapter 25, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy* (pp. 739-766). Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Peacocke, C. (No date). Perception, content and rationality. Available online at [http://www.columbia.edu/~cp2161/Online\\_Papers/](http://www.columbia.edu/~cp2161/Online_Papers/)
- Putnam, H. (1956). Reds, greens, and logical analysis. *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 65, no. 2, (April 1956), pp. 206-217.
- Putnam, H. (1957). Red and green all over again: a rejoinder to Arthur Pap. *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, Jan. 1957, pp. 100-103.
- Quine, W.V. (1969) Epistemology naturalized. (Chapter 3, *Ontological Relativity*, New York: Columbia University Press)
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press)
- Russell, B. (1940). *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*. (New York: W.W. Norton)
- Ryle, G. (1960). "Final discussion." (In D.F. Pears (Ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics* (pp. 142-164). London: Macmillan & C. Ltd.)

Soames, S. (2003). “The Rise and Fall of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning” (Chapter 13, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century vol. 1 The Dawn of Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Strawson, P. (1963). *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. (New York: Doubleday & Co. Originally published 1959.)

van Fraassen, B. (1995). Against naturalized epistemology. (In P. Leonardi & M. Santambrogio (Eds.), *On Quine: New Essays* (pp. 68-88). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

van Fraassen, B. (2002). *The Empirical Stance*. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press)

van Fraassen, B. (2007). From a view of science to a new empiricism. (In B. Monton (Ed.), *Images of Empiricism: Essays on Science and Stances, with a Reply from Bas C. van Fraassen* (pp. 337-383). Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Soames (2003) for a thorough discussion of the development and demise of the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness.

<sup>2</sup> And as Ayer and Hempel were to suggest about the verifiability criterion.

<sup>3</sup> I think this reply is implicit in the work of Quine (see especially 1969), but Quine does not explicitly reply to these objections. Also see Benjamin (1941) for a defense of empiricism against Russell’s self-refuting charge.

<sup>4</sup> Van Fraassen himself (1995, p69) offers a detailed and accurate explication of the fundamental principle of empiricism. His elaboration is very helpful in relieving the obscurities and vaguenesses in the principle. Rather than indulge in such an explication here, I refer the interested reader to van Fraassen. Of course, van Fraassen finds the principle, even thus elaborated, to be objectionable.

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful analysis of analytic knowledge, see Boghossian (1996). Boghossian offers an explanation of analytic knowledge in terms of what he calls “Frege-analyticity” and implicit definition that is not at odds with empiricism.

<sup>6</sup>The Hempelian fundamental principle of empiricism does not entail that experience cannot account for our knowledge of logic, mathematics, and formal propositions—it merely sets those aside. Furthermore, classical rationalists themselves sensed the need to provide *a priori* substantive propositions in order to establish their epistemology. That is one of the reasons that the ontological argument got such attention and support from Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, and later rationalists and their opponents.

<sup>7</sup> How and why sensory perception can be evidence or supply evidence is itself a difficult and contentious issue. See in particular Gupta (2006) for a recent book-length discussion of this issue and a proposed solution. See also Christopher Peacocke’s reply to Gupta (no date). Note that in defining “based on experience” I am diverging from classical empiricism, because I am not restricting experience to the individual’s own personal experience. Contemporary empiricists should adopt a more Quinen view of experience where it is social and intersubjective. I discuss this issue in a bit more detail below.

<sup>8</sup> Here and in the following by “knowledge” and the like I mean knowledge of propositions other than those of logic, mathematics, and formal ones such as those mentioned above.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Crane (2003, p506) makes precisely this point in his review of *BonJour* (1998).

An apparent advantage of the moderate empiricist picture as I have described it is that (like the foundationalist about empirical knowledge) it tries to tell a story about the structures or mechanisms by which we are justified in believing things. The appeal to rational insight, by

---

contrast, seems to give out a little too soon. ... It would be good to hear more from Bonjour about the ‘moving parts’ of rational insight—especially given his conviction that knowledge of meaning contributes nothing to *a priori* justification. Without this, we can throw his question back to him: “How exactly does rational insight contribute to *a priori* justification in the way that knowledge of meaning does not?”

Michael Devitt (2005, p. 119) also sharply challenges Bonjour:

In charging that the *a priori* is deeply obscure I am, according to Bonjour, “simply rejecting the idea that merely finding something to be intuitively necessary can ever constitute in itself a reason for thinking that it is true.” But I am not simply rejecting this: I am *demanding an explanation of how it could be so*. How could this intuitive process *justify* something unless the process is empirical? The *a priori* is mysterious because we do not have even a hint of a satisfactory answer. It seems like magic that a process in someone’s mind can justify her belief in an external worldly fact without that justification arising from some sort of experiential link to that fact.

<sup>10</sup> Cassam (2000) makes similar points and other related ones in his detailed treatment of the distinctions between empiricism and rationalism vis-à-vis the *a priori*. He suggests that the differences between contemporary moderate empiricists and moderate rationalists are merely verbal. I am not convinced yet that this is right, however I do not see that contemporary moderate rationalists such as Peacocke and Bonjour have established anything about *a priori* knowledge that is threatening to empiricism.

<sup>11</sup> And contemporary rationalists such as Peacocke and Bonjour.

<sup>12</sup> Hilary Putnam (1956 and 1957), for example, argues that the claim that no object can be both red and green is analytically knowable.

<sup>13</sup> Empirical psychologists, however, do research this issue and consider it within their area of investigation. Rorty (1979, p241, fn29) quotes from an article by the famous former Cornell experimental psychologists E.J. Gibson and J.J. Gibson: “Does all knowledge (information is the contemporary term) come through the sense organs or is some knowledge contributed by the mind itself?” This is from an article by the Gibsons in *The Psychological Review*.

<sup>14</sup> Likewise Wittgenstein’s (1953, p.223) famous aphorism: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.” The truth or falsity of this claim is not rationally accessible according to the empiricist theory I am arguing for. I think that Wittgenstein would agree.

<sup>15</sup> I have the highest regard for Prof. Mackie’s book, and believe that it is an insightful and useful work of philosophy. I disagree with Prof. Mackie about the interpretation and results of some of her arguments. I should note for the record that Mackie’s arguments for her claim about Aristotle are almost entirely negative. I believe these are excellent arguments. There is no reason to rule out the purely metaphysical claim that Aristotle could have been a toadstool throughout his entire existence in some other possible world.

<sup>16</sup> Peacocke (1988, pp463-468) offers three interesting examples of metaphysical claims that are apparently beyond empirical verification or falsification. He states that the claims are “spurious” for somewhat different reasons than I am proposing here.