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The Empirical Stance vs. The Critical Attitude

Rowbottom, Darrell Patrick (2005) *The Empirical Stance vs. The Critical Attitude*. UNSPECIFIED.



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Abstract

Van Fraassen has recently argued that empiricism can be construed as a stance, involving commitments, attitudes, values, and goals, in addition to beliefs and opinions. But this characterisation emerges from his recognition that to be an empiricist can not be to believe, or decide to commit to belief in, a foundational proposition, without removing any basis for a non-dogmatic empiricist critique of other philosophical approaches, such as materialism. However, noticeable by its absence in Van Fraassen's discussions is any mention of Bartley's 'pancritical rationalism', for Bartley offers a cohesive argument that genuine dogmatism lies precisely in the act of commitment to an idea. The consequence of denying this, he thinks, is an opening of the floodgates to irrationalism: if to rely on reasoned argument in decision-making is fundamentally an act of faith, then there is a tu quoque – "I simply have a different faith" – that may be employed by those who wish to shield their views from criticism. This raises the following question: why should it be any less dogmatic to adopt particular commitments, attitudes, values, and goals, rather than a particular belief or opinion, come what may? And if Bartley is right that there is only one non-dogmatic attitude – the critical attitude – then why might this not be adopted by an empiricist, a materialist, a metaphysician, or anyone else?

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Item Type: Other

Additional Information: This is a post-print. The article was published in South African Journal of Philosophy 24 (3), 200-223.

Keywords: Van Fraassen, Popper, Bartley, Critical Rationalism, Metaphysics, Empiricism

Subjects: [General Issues > Science vs. Pseudoscience](#)
[General Issues > Theory Change](#)
[General Issues > Philosophers of Science](#)

Depositing User: [Dr Darrell P. Rowbottom](#)

Date Deposited: 23 Sep 2005

Last Modified: 07 Oct 2010 11:13

Item ID: 2450

Public Domain: No

Commentary on: Van Fraassen, B.C. 2002. *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press)

URI: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/eprint/2450>

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