noninstrumental value of X—at least in the context of the
one life you know best. Mistakes are possible; but so also
(if this line of thought is sound) is knowledge, and the
knowledge may well be particular rather than general.

See also Good, The; Intrinsic Value; Value and Valuation.

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Joel J. Kupperman (2005)

VALUE JUDGMENTS

See Value and Valuation

VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

AND TRUTH, THE

See Knowledge and Truth, The Value of

Van Fraassen, Bas

(1941–)

Bas van Fraassen was born in Goes, in the Netherlands,
on April 5. He lived in Holland until he was fifteen years
old, when he moved with his family to Canada. After
finishing his undergraduate studies in philosophy (with
honors) at the University of Alberta in 1963, he went to
the University of Pittsburgh for his Ph.D., which he
completed in 1966 with a dissertation on the causal theory of
time that was supervised by Adolf Grünbaum. He taught
at Yale University, the University of Toronto, and the
University of Southern California before moving to
Princeton University, where he has been a Professor of
Philosophy since 1982.

Van Fraassen has made seminal contributions to sev-
eral areas of philosophy, and his work can be roughly
divided into three major "periods": (i) the philosophical
logic phase (1966–1979); (ii) the constructive empiricist
period (1980–1993); and (iii) the empirical stance phase
(1994 to the present). But throughout these periods, there
has been a unified vision underlying his approach, with
two crucial features: (a) the search for an empiricist
(an anti-realist and, in a sense, antimeetaphysical) approach to
science and philosophy more generally; and (b) an attempt
to preserve through this empiricism "classical" features of
the domain under consideration—by taking scientific
theories literally, retaining classical logic whenever possi-
ble, and resisting the need for introducing causally irre-
levant items (such as possible worlds).

In the philosophical logic phase, this vision is articu-
lated through the development of several proposals
guided by techniques from philosophical logic. For instance, van Fraassen’s method of supervaluations provides a way of retaining classical logic (or, at least, classical logic's theorems), even in the presence of truth-value gaps. This method can then be used to accommodate logical paradoxes, such as the Liar (“This sentence is not true”). Van Fraassen’s early work on space-time theories also illustrates the empiricist component of the vision, with the development of interpretations of space-time theories that do not presuppose the existence of absolute space (1970). Moreover, in his development of a semantics for free logic, van Fraassen assumed only existing individuals in the domain, thereby avoiding a commitment to nonexistent objects that early work in the area had presupposed. Finally, van Fraassen’s early theory of meaning relations among predicates and modality does not involve any commitment to real modalities in nature.

Several of these problems can be approached from a unified perspective with the development of constructive empiricism (van Fraassen 1980). This is a view about the aim of science: the search for empirically adequate theories. The constructive empiricist articulates something novel: an empiricist alternative to scientific realism that avoids the early pitfalls of logical positivism. As opposed to logical positivism, the constructive empiricist takes scientific theories literally; there’s no attempt to reformulate such theories in some formal language. And as opposed to scientific realism, the constructive empiricist puts forward an interpretation of science in which scientific theories need not be true to be good, as long as they are empirically adequate (and informative). To flesh out the proposal, van Fraassen argues that it is possible to make sense of scientific methodology from this viewpoint, and highlights, in particular, the crucial role played by models in scientific theorizing. He develops a new version of the semantic approach to scientific theories, insisting that to present a theory is to specify a class of models rather than to provide a list of axioms in a formalized language. As opposed to earlier positivist proposals, van Fraassen’s work articulates a theory of the pragmatics of explanation that does not require scientific theories to be true for them to be explanatory. He also advances a new interpretation of probability that is compatible with the rejection of real modalities in nature.

Constructive empiricism’s lack of commitment to metaphysically dubious notions (at least from an empiricist perspective)—such as laws of nature, possible worlds, and real modalities in nature—is developed further in van Fraassen’s book Laws and Symmetry (1989). The book argues that attempts to characterize the notion of law of nature are doomed to failure because either they are unable to justify the inference from It is a law that P to P, or they fail to identify the features that make P a law in the first place. As an alternative, van Fraassen suggests that many roles that traditional philosophical proposals have assigned to laws of nature can be accommodated without commitment to the latter—provided we examine the role played by symmetry (roughly, transformations that leave certain structures invariant). A detailed case for this proposal in the context of quantum mechanics and a thorough development of an empiricist view of quantum theory is then articulated in Quantum Mechanics: An Empiricist View (1991).

After the development of the details of constructive empiricism, a more general question arises: How is it possible to be an empiricist instead of just developing an empiricist approach to science? To elaborate a broader perspective on empiricism that includes constructive empiricism as a particular case is a major goal of van Fraassen’s empirical stance (2002). Instead of articulating empiricism as a doctrine (a set of beliefs), van Fraassen insists that empiricism should be conceptualized as a stance: an attitude, an epistemic policy. This move has several advantages. First, it avoids the incoherence of certain earlier empiricist proposals that failed to meet their own empiricist standards and ended up being meaningless or lacking any content. Second, the move also provides a novel way of understanding our practice, in particular the role of experience in our epistemic life, and how to make sense of scientific revolutions as a decision problem. The crucial features of van Fraassen’s earlier works are also found here, notably in the development of an empiricist perspective that preserves the "classical" features of the phenomena under consideration.

**See also** Empiricism; Laws of Nature; Liar Paradox, The; Logical Paradoxes; Philosophy of Science, Problems of; Pragmatics; Presupposition; Realism.

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