What is empiricism? There can be no authoritative answer to any such question. A historian of philosophy can at best try to call what is common to philosophers who either identified themselves, or have traditionally been identified, as empiricists. But what has set those philosophers apart from others, and especially from those whom they criticized, may not be captured in common views or doctrines. The historian may, in trying to fix the label, rely tacitly on a view of what philosophical positions are and how they are to be identified. Finally, it is typical of philosophers who decide to range themselves under some pre-existing banner ("empiricism", "pragmatism", "phenomenology") to change the very philosophy they take on, as much as did their historical heroes in their day. I will here try to give a sustained argument about what empiricism cannot be, and then enter upon a tentative exploration of what it should be (taken to be).

1. What empiricism cannot be

As I proceed I shall bring in piecemeal some of the characteristics that have characterized those episodes in the history of philosophy which I identify as paradigmatic for empiricism. That is clearly a biased way of proceeding. That I want to be an empiricist is intimately connected with my preference for certain philosophical moves or themes as against some others. When I report characteristics of empiricism, I will include only those I

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*In his 1986 Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association, Professor Kockelmans challenged me, in effect, to confront the metaphysics implicit in empiricism. This challenge was further elucidated in our subsequent correspondence. In response, I have been trying to re-develop empiricism self-critically so as to meet his challenge. The present paper has as companion my "Against Naturalized Empiricism", but is self-contained. It is appropriate for me here to acknowledge my great debt to Professor Kockelmans, whose writings I read already in Dutch when I was an undergraduate, with no idea at all that I would ever meet the author. To my good fortune, I not only met him but was able to take two seminars he gave at the University of Pittsburgh when I was a graduate student there. I owe much to his erudition and his gentle questing spirit; for the past three years I have again been struggling with problems he posed for me.

endorse, and neglect what I regard as common errors that past empiricists have fallen into. The goal is to develop a philosophical position which will share what is admirable in past versions of empiricism and which is feasible today.

1.1 What is a philosophical position?

To be an empiricist is to take a certain kind of philosophical position. But what is that? Typical examples that come to mind at once (nominalism vs. realism with respect to universals, dualism vs. monism on the mind-body question) are clearly views of what we and the world are like. They say that certain kinds of beings are real (universals, mind) and how they are related to each other. To have such a view then is to believe something. If we take this as the definitive cue we arrive at the following (meta) philosophical principle:

*Principle ZERO.* For each philosophical position $X$ there exists a statement $X+$ such that: to have (or take) position $X$ is to believe (or decide to believe) that $X+$.

Not just any statement $X+$ will fit here of course. To believe that there are flying saucers does not qualify as taking a philosophical position. But perhaps the belief that there are monads or universals or alternative possible worlds does so qualify.

If Principle ZERO is correct — and this is a big question, the moment the principle has been formulated — then it must yield a corollary for empiricism: there must be some statement $E+$ such that

\[(NE) \quad \text{To be an empiricist} = \text{to believe that} \ E+\]

I have given this corollary the mnemonic name “(NE)” for “Naive Empiricism.” That reveals at once, of course, that I do not regard it as obviously correct (though naivete does not disqualify one in philosophy). By implication then, I do not advance Principle ZERO as obviously correct. We need to see where all this leads us. The question we face is: what statement could possibly play the role of $E+$ in (NE)?