

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF IMMANUEL KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 ce) sought to “bridge” – to synthesize – the rationalist and empiricist traditions in epistemology. He did so in response to the skepticism of David Hume, whom Kant said had “awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers.”

Kant agreed with the empiricists that **“Concepts without perceptions are empty...”**. Concepts / ideas alone cannot constitute knowledge. Innate ideas do not constitute knowledge. There must be experience(s) for there to be knowledge.

However, Kant also agreed with the rationalists that **“...Perceptions without concepts are blind.”** Merely having experiences / perceptions also does not constitute knowledge. There must be some way in which the mind organizes / structures experience for there to be knowledge.

Kant also held that **“It is true that all knowledge begins with experience...”**. Without experience no knowledge takes place. Experience is the ‘initiator’ of coming to possess knowledge. Here he once again agrees with the empiricist affirmation of the necessity of experience in knowing.

However, Kant also held that **“...it is not true that all knowledge arises from experience.”** Experience is not the sole source of knowledge. There must also be ‘categories’ by which experience is structured / understood for there to be knowledge. Here he agrees with the rationalists.

Kant affirmed that **the mind is “active”** in the knowing process. The mind makes an active contribution to “the-world-as-it-is-known.” The “world-as-it-is-known” (what Kant would call the **‘phenomenal’** realm) conforms to the mind in the knowledge process, rather than the mind conforming to a world that has its own mind-independent structure / organization. Thus, knowledge has a profoundly subjective dimension (= the mind) as well as an objective dimension (= “the world-as it-is-in-itself,” - what Kant called the **‘noumenal’** realm.)

The mind contains **‘categories of the understanding.’** These categories are the ways in which the active mind forms or structures experience. For Kant, there were twelve such categories, one of which was the **category of ‘causation / cause-and-effect.’** The active mind relates and understands experiences in terms of some event-experiences being causes, with other event-experiences being their effects.

Kant affirmed **‘synthetic a-priori truths.’** These are truths that are “universal and necessary,” as **a-priori** truths are truths that are universal and necessary. Unlike universal and necessary truths that are analytically true (= true in accordance with the meaning of concepts, but telling us nothing about “the way the world is”), Kant affirmed that some universal and necessary truths are **‘synthetic’** – they tell us about “the way the known-world IS.” They are constitutive of ‘the world-as-it-is-known.’

The basis of scientific knowledge is “every event has a cause.” Hume demonstrated that we cannot claim to know / justify this on the basis of empiricist assumptions. He held that ‘cause’ is not a thing / fact “out there” in the world. Thus we can have no idea or knowledge of causal connections in reality - causal attributions are merely a type of mental ‘habit.’

Kant held that “every event has a cause” is a universally and necessarily true statement – something that we do know. It is not a mere mental ‘habit.’ But the truth of the statement is grounded in the ‘cause-category’ within the mind that actively structures, universally and necessarily, all our experience of the world. Kant assumed that every human being, as a rational being, possesses and utilizes the same categories of understanding. As reason is the same in all rational beings, so in principle the proper exercise of reason will lead any and all persons to knowledge claims that are objectively and universally valid.

It follows that we do not know reality as it might be “in itself” - apart from how our minds structure experience of ‘mind-independent reality.’ We do not know **‘noumena.’** We only know reality in terms of how our active minds structure / organize / form our experiences of mind-independent reality. We only know **‘phenomena.’** This distinction would open the door to skepticism for at least two reasons: 1) the acquisition of knowledge of cultural-anthropological differences that severely called into question that Kantian assumption that reason is the same in all human beings, and 2) the challenge to Kantian rationalism by the ‘perspectivism’ of Friedrich Nietzsche.