

COLLEGE GUILD
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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 3 of 6

Metaphysics to Epistemology

In the last unit, we talked about metaphysics and the questions of reality and existence. We will now explore epistemology, which is closely tied to metaphysics. As we continue on our journey from Plato's cave in ancient Greece, we are moving to the age of the **Enlightenment**, roughly around the beginning of the 18th century (1701) or the middle of the 17th century (1650). The Enlightenment is a term used to describe a period in Western Europe when many new ideas which centered around the use of logic and reason came to the fore. It was a time when the doctrines and authority of the Church were beginning to be questioned. We'll start at German philosopher Immanuel Kant's office.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy which investigates human knowledge. It seeks to answer questions such as: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? How does knowledge differ from simple opinion. Human beings are capable of holding and expressing a wide range of opinions on a variety of topics. But how do we know what we know?

Another way to think of how we come to know certain things is through the two terms, a priori and a posteriori. **A posteriori knowledge** is dependent on experience or the senses. One determination of reality is what one can touch, see, feel, taste, and hear. **A priori knowledge** is knowledge independent of experience. Many philosophers believe mathematics is an example of a priori knowledge. They believe we are born with innate knowledge that does not require the experience of the senses. They say we simply know what a triangle is when we see one.

1. Sit quietly for a moment and become aware of your five senses. In this moment of awareness write down what you:

- a. Hear
- b. See
- c. Taste
- d. Smell
- e. Touch

2. Give an example of a posteriori knowledge that depends on the five senses.

3. Give an example of knowledge that is a priori, knowledge that does not depend on the five senses.

There are generally two types of judgments in philosophy. Philosophers who believe all knowledge is a priori are **rationalists** whereas philosophers who believe all knowledge is a posteriori are **empiricists**. Another way to understand these two opposing camps of scholars is through the term **analytic** and **synthetic judgments**.

Analytic judgments are true solely by definition. Examples of analytic judgments:

All bachelorettes are unmarried women.

Dogs are mammals who are descended from wolves.

These are analytic judgments because “unmarried women” is part of the definition of “bachelorettes,” and dogs are indeed mammals descended from the wolf family.

4. Give your own example of an analytic judgment.

Synthetic judgments can be proven true or false from experience. We *make* these propositions from what we learn in everyday life. Example of a synthetic judgments:

All bachelorettes are tall.

All dogs are friendly.

These are synthetic judgments because they are conclusions someone has reached after meeting many bachelorettes and dogs. They have nothing to do with the definition of bachelorettes or dogs.

5. Give your own example of a synthetic judgment.

Rationalists believe that all knowledge is contained in **a priori** and **analytic** judgments. In other words, all knowledge in the world is pre-given before human beings came to the world and are true by universal definitions. Experience plays no part in knowledge for it can only tell us how something is in one instance, but not how it is universally.

6. What’s an example in the universe that would support a rationalist?

Empiricists on the other hand believe the complete opposite. They believe all knowledge is captured through **a posteriori** and **synthetic** judgments. In other words, all knowledge in the world is created solely through what we can experience through our senses and the conclusions we can come to from such experiences. Empiricists cannot offer universality like rationalists can, but they can offer scientific verifiability that rationalists struggle to provide.

7. What’s an example in the universe that would support an empiricist?

8. Take the side of either a rationalist or empiricist. Write an essay defending your view.

Both sides have their strengths and weaknesses, and this is where Immanuel Kant comes in.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) disagreed with both the rationalists such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and John Locke (1632-1704), an empiricist who believed we can only know what we gather from our senses. In his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims a distinction between a “noumenal world,” the world of things in themselves, and the “phenomenal world,” the world of appearances.

9. How would you describe “the world of things in themselves”? Do humans inhabit it?

10. Could “the world of appearances” exist in a world without humans? Explain.

Kant’s key point is that the mind shapes, categorizes, and organizes the experiences that constitute the world of appearances. In other words, it imposes order on the raw data which come in from our senses. We bring order and regularity to the world that give us our scientific laws of gravity, etc. He claimed that space and time are **a priori synthetic** judgments meaning that space (the sense of distance and depth we have as humans) and time (seasonal changes, aging) are not things in the world themselves, but like “glasses” we automatically wear as human beings. Through this a priori view of the world, we can make claims to knowledge by finding patterns in the instances we experience in the world.

Through this move, Kant attempted to provide a middle ground between the polarities of radical rationalism—wherein human thought is limited to some pre-destined realm—and radical empiricism—wherein human thought is limited to scientific verifiability.

11. Do you think Kant makes a stronger argument than Leibniz or Locke? Explain why or why not.

12. Do you think Kant was successful in trying to establish a middle ground between rationalism and empiricism?

Now that we've unraveled a bit of metaphysics and epistemology, we're going to move to our third branch of philosophy: ethics. Note the lack of room for ethics and morality in Kant's argument.

13. How do you think morality and ethics would fit into epistemology?

We will be traveling to the Netherlands to the home of a certain French philosopher named René Descartes.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes