Sensation refers to sensory experience, and epistemology is the philosophy or theory of knowledge, after the Latin *episteme*, meaning “knowledge”. Epistemology and sensation are side-by-side because they have a long, complex, and sometimes tense relationship, and the relationship is important for appreciating that what is theorized as “knowledge” can affect what is understood by “sensation”. The kinds of question addressed in epistemology include: What is knowledge? What distinguishes knowledge from belief and opinion? What makes a statement true? and What are the sources of knowledge? Sensation is recognized by epistemology as one of the sources of knowledge, alongside memory, testimony, reason, induction and introspection, but this has not always been the case. It is a defining feature of modern epistemology that the senses provide valuable information about the world that cannot be reached through reason alone. However, because the senses can have an intensity and uniqueness that are difficult to describe, it is sometimes not entirely clear what they offer as knowledge or even whether epistemology has a secure and adequate grasp of them. This entry explains some of the key theories of sensation in the history of epistemology, from ancient Greece to the present day, and shows how competing views of the relation between philosophy and science inform contemporary ideas about the senses.

Sensation in the history of epistemology

The history of epistemology is to a large extent a history of different attitudes toward sensation in relation to knowledge. A variety of views existed in ancient Greek thought. The first systematic account to identify five senses was by Democritus (c. 460–370 BC), but he saw sensory knowledge as imperfect. This is
because sensation presents us with colors, sounds, smells, etc., when, as an atomist, he believed that only atoms and emptiness truly exist. Plato (427–347 BC) also disregarded sensation, but this time it was on the grounds that it offered detail and change, when true knowledge of any subject consisted in perception of its singular, perfect, unchanging essence, which he called its “Form”. Plato’s pupil Aristotle (384–322 BC) turned things around with yet another epistemology. Categories used in the production of knowledge, he maintained, were not derived from the Forms but were ordering principles active in sensory perception. The value of the five senses lay in that each sense was a distinct form of perception (now called a “modality”) attuned to objects of a certain kind, which he termed its “special objects”, i.e., sight is attuned to colors, hearing to sounds, etc., and, as such, contributed to the discrimination required for knowledge. The fact that there are objects that can be perceived by more than one sense – movement (for example, it can be seen and heard), rest, number, figure and magnitude, what Aristotle termed “common sensibles” – posed a problem, which he sought to explain by claiming that the senses can form a unity.

Modern epistemology is widely held to start in the 17th century with the French rationalist philosopher, René Descartes (1596–1650). Faced with the conflict between the Catholic church and early astronomy over the place of humanity in the universe, Descartes sought to establish the foundations of knowledge that were beyond doubt. He judged these to be the process of doubt itself and statements true by definition, e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$, in other words, certain operations of reason and ideas that reason could determine as “clear and distinct” without recourse to experience. The senses were dismissed as sources of knowledge because of their changeable nature. The devaluing of sensation because it displays difference and directs attention away from unity was redolent of Plato.

Making reason the foundation of knowledge was opposed by John Locke (1632–1704), an empiricist, on political grounds: Reason is universal and, as such, does not assign sufficient importance to the particularities of experience, such as the fact that different communities live their lives according to different customs. In
contrast to rationalism, empiricism argued that the foundation of knowledge was experience, and Locke introduced the notion that sensation comes to us in the form of “simple ideas”, ideas that cannot be broken down or pre-empted by reason because they contain unique, particular information from the world that only experience can supply. Aristotle’s assertion that there are five discrete senses was reinforced by Locke’s view that simple ideas are received according to their appropriate channels whose course should not be confused or corrupted if fidelity to the world is to be maintained.

The contest between rationalism and empiricism brought epistemology to an impasse in the 18th century: Descartes could not build upon his foundations without relying upon the problematic notion of “clear and distinct ideas”, and the developers of empiricism, most notably David Hume (1711–1776), found that an epistemology rooted in experience could not explain abstract, structural concepts such as causality, number, and the self. Both systems had run aground as a result of their own internal commitments. To overcome the impasse, one of the most important moves in modern philosophy was made by the Prussian thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Rather than see reason and sensation as competing, divergent principles, he introduced the idea that each requires the other for its own possibility. The concepts of reason must apply to sensation, otherwise they become abstractions detached from experience and inclined towards the construction of dogmatic metaphysical schemes. Moreover, sensation requires conceptual organization supplied by reason; otherwise it is blind and incapable of constituting knowledge. According to Kant, sensation is not just a series of channels receiving simple impressions but a facility whose capacity for sensitivity is shaped and organized by factors intrinsic to human being’s situation in the world. The consequences of Kant’s philosophy are still being felt today, for it affects how we handle boundaries, especially the boundaries between thought and sensation and between self and world.
In contemporary epistemology, there is a division between philosophical studies that seek to work alongside science, clarifying or critiquing its concepts, and others that are wary of how science is carving up human experience. This has come to be known as the analytic–continental divide. It originated in the “science versus metaphysics” contest between Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in 1929. For Carnap, the true view of the world was the scientific one, because of the success with which science explained the natural world and because scientific statements could be verified by experience. However, for Heidegger, science represented a forgetting of metaphysics because, in concentrating upon what was measurable, it failed to address all the aspects of human life that eluded classification, including the structures beyond experience that allowed experience to arise in the first place. Present in Heidegger’s thinking were the Kantian notions that experience is organized by a structure that doesn’t necessarily divide up neatly into “human subject” and “world” and that, with different structures in place, different forms of experience might be possible.

Analytic and continental approaches to the “given”

A case in point to illustrate the difference between analytic and continental approaches is the question: What is given in experience? An analytic answer is H.H. Price’s attempt to determine what seeing itself actually is. Price suggests that, when something is presented to consciousness, for example, a tomato, although it can be doubted that it is a tomato, what cannot be doubted is that there is a red, round patch in front of the perceiver. This state of being present to consciousness Price terms “being given”, and the item that is present he calls a “sense-datum”. Price’s endeavor to identify the constituents of sensation as they are experienced is widely criticized within analytic epistemology on the grounds that the notion of immediate acquaintance is undermined by its reliance upon general, mediating concepts such as “red”, “patch”, ‘round’, etc. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is frequently invoked to make the Kantian point that all references to sensation, no
matter how private, presuppose a shared language. Nonetheless, the idea that we sense the world not directly but indirectly through intermediaries, still often referred to as sense data, has become a widely-held view, known as the representational view. It persists because it is judged to be consistent with scientific, physical, and causal theories of perception that rely upon units or intermediaries within perception.

In terms of continental epistemology, due to interest from Kant to Heidegger in what makes experience possible, human subject and world are not assumed as the starting points, so there is no talk of a subject in receipt of the given. Instead, starting from the fact that there is experience, attention is paid to what happens when the flow of experience is interrupted by the decision to describe it.

Sensation is not seen as a datum whose contents can be individuated. Rather, experience is taken to be a condition of being-in-the-world (the hyphens signal that the subject–object distinction does not apply), and focusing upon and describing sensory qualities are taken as “interruptions” that are valuable because sensations have been identified and situated within a wider context. Here is an indication of the difference between the analytic and continental approaches: The former aims to clarify concepts, the latter to revivify experience or change what it is understood to be. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), a critic of Heidegger’s, arguably does the most to show how description stimulates sensation, with his philosophical novel *Nausea* being a highlight.

Epistemology and sensation naturalized?

Developments in the science of sensation have had an impact on analytic epistemology. Attempts to understand the senses from a purely philosophical perspective have been challenged on the grounds that any understanding of sensation will be theoretically informed, and scientific studies are regularly revising the concepts from which theories of perception are constructed. In philosophical terms, this means epistemology and sensation have become naturalized, that is, the
facts and descriptions generated by science are more accurate than logical
deductions based on observation. For example, one of the long-standing
questions in the philosophy of the senses is: How many senses are there? A
widely-cited criterion for what counts as a sensory modality, offered by H.P. Grice,
is the introspectible character of sensation, e.g., first-person, inward reflection on
how seeing differs from touching. However, according to Brian Keeley, there is
growing evidence from science that people possess a vomeronasal system, the
ability to detect pheromones, without being consciously aware they are doing so.
In other words, pheromone detection has no introspectible character. This
suggests that Grice’s criterion has to be abandoned. However, it should be noted
that Keeley’s definition of a sensory modality is one that, as he admits, is *useful to
science*, couched in terms of wired-up organs that facilitate behavior with regard to a
specific physical class of energy. Against this, some argue that such science-
friendly accounts are effectively changing the subject and defining the senses in
such a way that they are no longer what they are commonly held to be.

It is a problem that is hard to avoid once it is recognized that knowledge is always
structured by concepts. As soon as an instrument or definition or theory is
applied, a commitment is made, a particular section of reality is placed in a frame
and given a meaning and value, and everything outside that frame is subordinated
or dismissed. On the plus side, it means that the study served by the frame can go
ahead, the meaning and value can be put to work in a method, and conclusions
can be drawn. On the minus side, a lot of reality is excluded which, given a
different frame, could have had a bearing, if not on the study in question, then on
a related one. The situation is pertinent to epistemology and sensation because the
senses change depending on which epistemology is adopted. Sensation can only
enter discourse through description but the description, far from merely capturing
what is there, imposes its own frame, and emphasizes a particular character within,
or even assigns a character to, sensation. This conundrum ensures that the
relation between epistemology and sensation remains complex.

Recommended further reading


