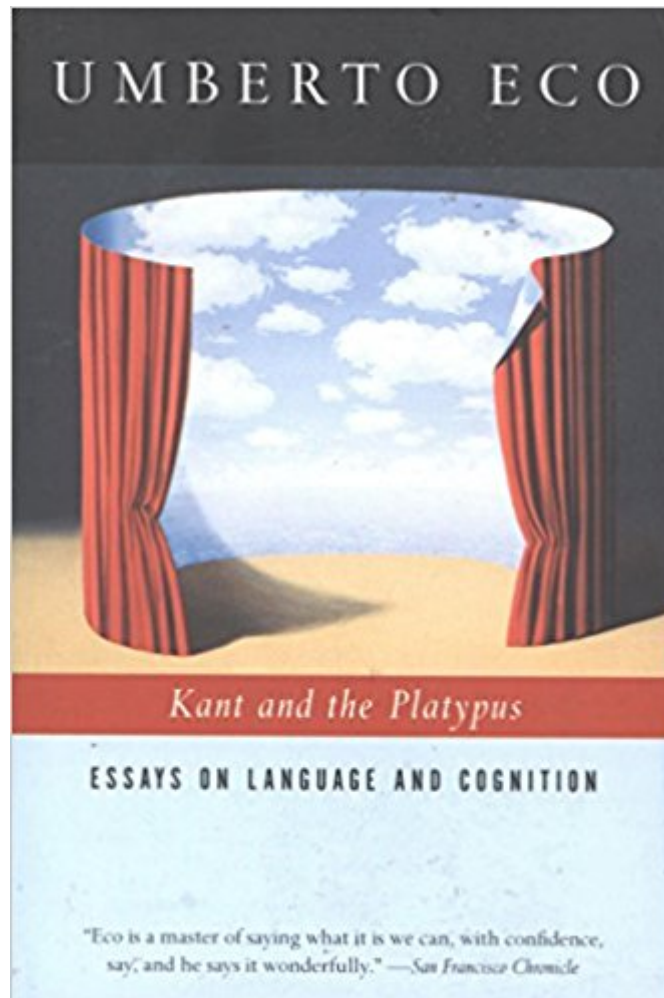




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# Kant And The Platypus: Essays On Language And Cognition



## Synopsis

How do we know a cat is a cat? . . . and why do we call it a cat? An intriguing and often fascinating look at words, perceptions, and the relationship between them (Newark Star-Ledger). In *Kant and the Platypus*, the renowned semiotician, philosopher, and bestselling author of *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* explores the question of how much of our perception of things is based on cognitive ability, and how much on linguistic resources. In six remarkable essays, Umberto Eco explores in depth questions of reality, perception, and experience. Basing his ideas on common sense, Eco shares a vast wealth of literary and historical knowledge, touching on issues that affect us every day. At once philosophical and amusing, *Kant and the Platypus* is a tour of the world of our senses, told by a master of knowing what is real and what is not. An erudite, detailed inquiry into the philosophy of mind. Here, Eco is continental philosopher, semiotician, and cognitive scientist rolled all into one. "Library Journal (starred review)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Umberto Eco can be a tough author to follow. But if you want a brain work out and you are

interested in semiotics and/or linguistics, this is the book for you! LOVE how to Travel with a Salmon too. That is a more "fun" read!

I read the review of Simon Blackburn trashing the book: Eco made a few mistakes concerning the two dogmas of empiricism (he confused Davidson's work with Quine's first dogma). So I am sure many readers hesitated after a review by such a rigorous big gun thinker as Blackburn. When I started reading the book I was taken aback by the combination of depth and the vividness of the style. Eco is sprightly and alive, something that cannot be said of many philosophers dealing with the subject of categories. The notion of categories is not trivial: you need a simple conditional prior to identify an object; it is a simple mathematical fact. You need to know what a table is to see it in the background separated from its surroundings. You need to know what a face is so when it rotates you know it is still the same face. Computers have had a hard time with such pattern recognition. A PRIOR category is a necessity. This was Kant's intuition (the so-called "rationalism"). This is also the field of semiotics as initially conceived. Eco took it to greater levels with his notion of what I would call in scientific language a compression, a "simplification". This leads to the major problem we face today: what if the act of compressing is arbitrary? Not just very deep but it is a breath of fresh air to see such a philosophical discussion nondull, nondry, alive!

its a tough read. bring your dictionary and your thinking cap

Why only two stars? I'm fascinated by books about the origins and evolution of language, but this one definitely belongs on the "philosophy", rather than the "linguistics" shelf (I suppose the mention of Kant in the title should have been sufficient warning). And, though I have a decent enough training in logic and mathematics, my philosophical chops are non-existent. So that paragraphs like the following just stick in my craw, like an indigestible platypus-burger: "First of all, so that these most partial notes may be understood, I must clarify what I mean by the term "referring". I intend to exclude a "broad" use of the term, and I think it would be appropriate to limit the notion of referring to what is perhaps more properly describable as cases of designation, that is to utterances that mention particular individuals, groups of individuals, specific facts or sequences of facts, in specific times and places. From now on I shall also be using the generic notion of "individual" for identifiable spatiotemporal segments, such as 25 April 1945, and I shall hold to the golden decision by which *nominantur singularia sed universalia significantur*." So, here's the thing. I actually had five years of Latin in high school, so I can reasonably figure out that that last part means something along the

lines of 'although the specific is named, the general is to be understood' (e.g. 'the platypus' can be taken to mean that particular platypus over there, but it can also mean 'platypuses in general'). So I can figure it out. But I RESENT HAVING TO. There seems to be no particular reason to lapse into Latin at the point where he does - it smacks of flaunting one's erudition (and, dear God, Umberto has erudition out the wazoo), at the price of potentially losing a significant fraction of one's readers. So, only two stars from me. Readers with a stronger background in philosophy and a greater tolerance for gratuitous bursts of Latin may feel differently. But reviews which suggest that this book is accessible to the 'general reader' are severely misguided, in my opinion.

Eco's theses rapidly submerge in a sea of florid and neologistic prose. They reappear occasionally like the blowhole of some great whale, more suggesting than revealing the unseen beast below. I frequently wondered whether there was a beast, or if the author was trusting in the dazzle of the waves to distract the reader from an essential hollowness in his creation. The book is nonetheless entertaining for those who enjoy grand displays of erudition.

Dont get me wrong, Im generally big on Eco, not only his novels, but also the other essay books and *Travels in Hyperreality* really was an eye opener in my intellectual development. But *Kant and the Platypus* was a real disappointment. First, the reference to Kant is rather misleading, for Kant's work is reviewed rather summarily and reduced to an absurdity. Kant's categories of cognition are not geared towards semiotics as such, but towards formal logical operations, the space time structure of thinking. To say that the Kantian categories fall short of an analysis of meaning is to suggest that the faucet was deficient in putting out the fire at Macy's. Second, to say the perceptual categories of every day meaning are negotiated contracts with a community of parlants, does not require almost 400 pages. The essays are like pastries oversaturated with saccharine. After the initial taste or two, u just feel like putting it down. It was a labor to honor the man by finishing the book.

What is the boundary between cognition and mere philosophy of language? What is the role of language in cognition? What is the platypus' place in a mammalian dominated world? These are just a few of the probing questions that Umberto Eco asks and brilliantly answers in *Kant and the Platypus*. There should be no cognition issues involved in the purchase of this book: it simply is a must-own.

Eco dazzles us with this great work on cognition and language ... What is a platypus? If X is a

platypus and Y is a platypus but X ≠ Y, then can we legitimately call both X and Y platypuses? Not all platypuses are the same .... Similarly, what is a book? Kant and the Platypus is a book and a trashy novel is a book but they are not the same. In fact, this is not just a book but a great book!

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