



Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition

By Umberto Eco

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How do we know a cat is a cat? And why do we call it a cat? How much of our perception of things is based on cognitive ability, and how much on linguistic resources? Here, 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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Describing Umberto Eco as a writer is like describing the platypus as an animal. What do readers expect when they see the author's name on a book jacket? It's a tricky question to answer, given his range and versatility: he has produced studies of semiotics, children's books, medieval history, essays on contemporary culture, and, of course, novels--most notably *The Name of the Rose* and *The Island of the Day Before*. So first, a word of warning. Anyone familiar with Eco the novelist or essayist might well be dismayed by *Kant and the Platypus*, for this new book returns to his preoccupations of the 1960s and 1970s--to semiotics and cognitive semantics. As such, it can be a daunting volume (the initial chapter, for example, riffs on the numerous philosophical concepts of being). And second, a word of encouragement: this is a wonderful engagement with the issues of language itself. Even as he beckons the reader into one linguistic thicket after another, Eco always keeps a commonsensical perspective, using stories to explicate the knottiest concepts.

Why did Marco Polo describe the rhinoceros as a type of unicorn? Why couldn't 18th-century observers figure out how to classify the duck-billed platypus? Given a dictionary or encyclopedia definition of a mouse, how easy would it be to identify one if we had never seen one before? These are some of the examples that Eco uses to explore the ways in which we see and describe the world--the ways, that is, in which cultures develop taxonomies. If you want to know "why we can tell an elephant from an armadillo," or why mirrors do *not* in fact reverse images, this book will tell you. In fact, it will also tell you why you know what I am talking about when I say "this book." Got it? No? Then get it. --*Burhan Tufail*

From Publishers Weekly

Consider the platypus. With its famous molelike body carrying a beaver's tail and a duck's beak, the beast confounded the first Western scientists who studied it in 1798. Was it a mammal or a reptile? Did it lay eggs? Was it just a taxonomic hoax? The platypus eventually found its rightful place in the animal kingdom, but as Eco (*Travels in Hyperreality*, etc.) shows in these challenging essays, the questions it raised about language and perception still animate some sharply contested semiotic debates. Writing with his customary keenness of intellect, Eco ranges widely over metaphysical terrain, drawing on Aristotle, Heidegger and C.S. Peirce to inform his discussions. Revising aspects of Kant's philosophy in terms of cognitive studies, Eco ponders how we identify the things around us and argues that meaning in the world is ultimately contractual and negotiable. When Aztecs first saw horses ridden by Spanish conquistadors, for example, they used their previous knowledge to surmise that the invaders were riding deer. In another example, Eco investigates how we can recognize a Bach suite for solo cello, even when played by different soloists or transcribed for the recorder. Throughout, Eco gamely reconsiders his 1976 work, *A Theory of Semiotics*, over which many a gauntlet was testily thrown, and revisits other key moments in the history of semiotic research. This collection will certainly appeal to specialists. But Eco's ability to balance technical subject matter with broadly intelligible anecdotes and illustrations should make it valuable and pleasurable for anyone seeking a gallant introduction to the philosophy of language. (Nov.) FYI: Also in November Harvest will release Eco's *Serendipities* in paperback (\$12, ISBN 0-15-600751-7)

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From Library Journal

This book is an erudite, detailed inquiry into the philosophy of mind. Eco's concern here is the Kantian question, How is it that the manifold of sense perceptions becomes transformed by the mind into knowledge? As Eco (semiotics, Univ. of Bologna) puts the question, What would Kant have done had he come upon a

platypus?-using the animal to represent something initially unrecognizable. To answer the question, Eco lets his playful, encyclopedic mind roam freely throughout these (recent) essays. The often highly abstract discussion Alarded with expressions in Greek, German, French, and ItalianAis interlaced with deeply inventive thought experiments and imaginative dialogs. Philosophic thinking from ancient to contemporary philosophers (with an emphasis on the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce) is weighed and evaluated. Here, Eco is continental philosopher, analytic philosopher, linguistic philosopher, semiotician, and cognitive scientist all rolled into one. Philosophers will love this; others will be mystified. Highly recommended for all academic philosophy collections.

-A Leon H. Brody, U.S. Office of Personnel Management. Lib., Washington, DC

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Colleen Williams:

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