

WAYS OF KNOWING

John Ehman, 10/00, rev. 2/05
john.ehman@uphs.upenn.edu

Claims of knowledge rest upon “ways of knowing” (in other words, *how* we “know” what we claim to “know”). Four widely accepted epistemological categories of “ways of knowing” are listed below, along with some of their recognized advantages and disadvantages.

WAY OF KNOWING	SOME MAJOR ADVANTAGES	SOME MAJOR DISADVANTAGES
Sensory Perception / Observation (Empiricism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge is grounded in <i>observable</i> “facts” and is thus termed <i>objective</i> • claims of knowledge may be tested and criticized by others relatively easily • it is basic to the scientific method, which has proven to be a valuable process in establishing a great deal of our knowledge in the modern world • it is a way of knowing that often can be tested <i>repeatedly</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all phenomena are not easily observable, and some phenomena may not be observable at all • our senses have limits (e.g., human hearing differs from that of other animals) and can at times mislead us (e.g., optical illusions) • observable data takes on meaning by the way it is organized and interpreted, and such organization and interpretation may introduce bias • emphasis on “objectivity” may mask “subjective” influences
Reason / Logic (Rationalism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it does not depend upon the limits of sensory observation • it is checked by rules of logic and internal consistency • in its least formal practice, this is often a “common sense” way of knowing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it works with abstractions which may be unrelated to the “real world we live in” • logical arguments may hide logical fallacies and rhetorical conceits • what at first may seem “logical” may turn out to be merely social/cultural convention
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it utilizes the wisdom of “great” people and traditions • many “authorities” are recognized as such because they have been time-tested through some social process of validation • utilizing authorities can conserve our own effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authorities can be wrong • authority is sometimes largely just a function of the popularity or political power of a person or tradition • deference to authorities can hinder our own critical judgment or cause us to discount our own wisdom
Intuition / Inspiration / Revelation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it may allow us to “know” things which could be unavailable to us by other ways of knowing • it may allow us a direct and unmediated form of knowledge • it seems to produce knowledge that is personally powerful and deeply affecting • it may allow us to tap into a certain “emotional wisdom” (as opposed to what is purely intellectual) or a transcendent or divine knowing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it deals with personal and private experience that is relatively inaccessible to others or to outside critical evaluation • it may be quite vulnerable to personal misconceptions/delusions • because it is such a personal and private way of knowing, it may be hard to communicate/translate this knowledge for others’ use • it may be the subtle product of undifferentiated <i>other</i> ways of knowing