

Immanuel Kant

Biography / Overview

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a German philosopher who stands as one of the most important figures in Western philosophy. Born and raised in Königsberg, Prussia, he spent his entire life there, teaching, thinking, and writing.

Kant's work bridged the gap between rationalist and empiricist traditions. With his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he changed the way philosophers think about knowledge, arguing that the human mind actively shapes our experience of the world. In ethics, he introduced the idea of the categorical imperative—a universal moral law based on reason and duty.

Kant's ideas laid the groundwork for German Idealism and still shape debates in philosophy, ethics, political theory, and even cognitive science today.

Sources:

Britannica
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Major Works:

Critique of Pure Reason (1781, revised 1787): Kant's masterwork on epistemology and metaphysics—how we know what we know.

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785): Outlines his moral philosophy and introduces the categorical imperative.

Critique of Practical Reason (1788): Further develops his ethics, focusing on autonomy, freedom, and moral necessity.

Critique of Judgment (1790): Discusses aesthetics, beauty, and purpose in nature.

Metaphysics of Morals (1797): A systematic look at Kant's views on ethics, rights, and politics.

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: April 22, 1724 – Königsberg, Prussia

Died: February 12, 1804 – Königsberg, Prussia

Sources:

Britannica
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Notable / Best-Known For

Creating transcendental idealism, which explains how the mind structures experience.
Developing the categorical imperative, a rational standard for moral action.
Laying the foundation for modern epistemology and deontological ethics.
Bridging Enlightenment ideals with deep questions about freedom, morality, and human dignity.
Influencing nearly every major philosopher after him, including Hegel, Rawls, and Habermas.

Famous Quotes

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” — *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
“Science is organized knowledge. Wisdom is organized life.”
“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.”

Major Works / Textual Contents

Critique of Pure Reason

Examines how we can have knowledge independent of experience (a priori).
Introduces the distinction between phenomena (what we perceive) and noumena (things-in-themselves).
Shows how space, time, and causality are not learned but built into the way we experience the world.

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals

Sets up the categorical imperative, a rule for ethical decision-making based on universality and human dignity.
Stresses that moral actions are done from duty, not for outcomes.

Critique of Practical Reason

Expands on the moral law and the freedom required to follow it.
Introduces the idea that belief in God and immortality is necessary for moral hope.

Critique of Judgment

Explores beauty, taste, and the concept of purpose in nature.
Serves as a bridge between Kant’s theoretical and practical philosophies.

Influences / Intellectual Context

Kant was influenced by both rationalists like Leibniz and empiricists like Hume. Hume’s skepticism about causation famously “awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber.” In response, Kant argued that while all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not all arise from experience.

As a figure of the Enlightenment, he emphasized reason, autonomy, and moral law, but he also critiqued the limits of pure reason and the dangers of blind faith in it.

Legacy and Modern Significance

Kant's influence is hard to overstate. He shaped nearly every major field in philosophy.

Ethics: Kantian ethics is a foundation for discussions on duty, rights, and justice.

Epistemology: He revolutionized how we understand perception and knowledge.

Politics: His ideas helped inspire concepts like cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace.

Education & Enlightenment: He defined enlightenment as thinking for oneself.

His work continues to inform philosophy, legal theory, cognitive science, and debates about autonomy and moral responsibility.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

Kant's ethical framework underpins human rights law, bioethics, and AI ethics.

His view of the mind shapes cognitive science and theories of perception.

His notion of enlightenment guides ideas of civic education, freedom of thought, and democratic participation.

Philosophers, scientists, and policymakers alike turn to Kant for guidance on universal moral norms.

Studied in virtually every philosophy curriculum around the globe.

Suggested Reading and Resources

A. Secondary Literature

Paul Guyer – *Kant* (Routledge, 2006)

Henry E. Allison – *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (Yale University Press, 1983)

Allen W. Wood – *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

B. Archival and Online Resources

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Kant

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Kant

Project Gutenberg – Kant's Works

Kant on the Web (Princeton)