Few philosophers are able to define the agenda for discussion of an issue for fifty years, and fewer still for a century. Kant is exceptionally influential, given that his work has been central to the discussion of ethics for over two hundred years. It is not that all subsequent philosophers have agreed with his views on ethics. Many have not, yet even those who disagree with him cannot ignore him.

Kant was born on April 22, 1724 and died in 1804. According to one Kant biographer, William Wallace (Kant. Philadelphia: Lippincott, n.d.), April 22 in the East Prussian calendar is the day of Emanuel, hence the name for the newest member of the Kant household. The young Immanuel received a classical education and in 1755 became a privat-docent, a teacher whose position is supported by student fees. In 1770 he received appointment as professor of logic and metaphysics and turned his scholarly attention mainly to mathematics and physical science. Kant also introduced the study of physical geography into the university curriculum and is still considered by geographers as the founder of their discipline. His major philosophical work, Critique of Pure Reason, was not written until he was fifty-seven years old, yet it is for his work in philosophy that Kant is still considered one of the discipline’s pivotal figures.

There are many reasons for Kant’s significance, not the least of which is redefinition of the scope of philosophy. He believed the job of philosophy is to seek out fundamental principles. This means exploring the possibilities and limits of knowledge and the principles applicable to human conduct. Unlike many of his contemporaries Kant rejected the notion that we have a separate moral consciousness, arguing instead that reason serves the dual function of directing our acquisition of knowledge and legislating moral guidance. In his writings Kant looked for the fundamental principles of morality, hence the title of one of his most famous books: Foundations of the
Metaphysics of Morals, which, as the title says, deals with the basis of the fundamental principles of morality. Kant did not think it was the job of philosophers to apply these principles, leaving that task to those trained in the social sciences.

When Kant referred to the morality-guiding function of human reason, he used the term practical reason, derived from the Greek word for action and conduct. In formulating practical reason’s role, Kant formulated a principle he called the categorical imperative, an unconditional demand that free individuals legislate for themselves. The richness of this concept is such that no introduction can do it justice; it is better to let Kant speak for himself. However, one final comment is needed. Kant was insistent throughout all his writings that morality is doing the right thing for the right reason, a matter of acting from our sense of duty. But how do we know what our duty is? It is the role of reason to answer this question, and the categorical imperative is the formula for achieving it.

Although today we might consider ethics separately from other topics, Kant’s view was that understanding morality is bound up with the other “big” ideas: God, human freedom, the soul, and immortality. Each of these topics can be considered in isolation from the others, but to understand fully the point of view that Kant offers, it is better to see all these ideas as a constellation that enlivens the human spirit. The metaphor is apt, given one of Kant’s most-famous statements: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily I reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (Critique of Practical Reason, 162).

Suggested Further Reading