Immanuel Kant and his influence on our daily lives

Rose Marie Boudeguer
Director of Research Services at Banca March
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We tend to think that philosophers contribute ideas that are of interest to the spirit and mind, but that their work has little practical use. Philosophy, however, is a science that has tremendous influence on our daily lives. As an example, I invite you to review the musings of Immanuel Kant and the legacy he left us.

A couple of months ago, two young politicians were criticised in the press and on social media because, during a debate at a university, they stumbled into a discussion of philosophy. One claimed to know Kant given the thinker’s importance in the study of law though he admitted never having read any of his books, and the other misspoke the title of one of Kant's major works.

In the increasingly fast-paced world in which we live, there is hardly anyone –especially under the age of 40– who has read the original works of the leading philosophers, economists, historians, and scientists and who, at the same time, is successful at work, looks after family and friends, cares about the community, manages their health, and pursues their dreams. In life, there isn’t time to do all of that. Unfortunately, we have to choose.

Though they haven’t read the original texts, which are often quite dense, it is interesting that these men, who seek to govern the destiny of a nation, know and understand the proposals of those who probed the fundamentals of life in society. In this context, it is striking that both politicians mentioned Kant. Politics is the science of governance and the organisation of society, but it is also the art of negotiating to reconcile interests. In addition to his other achievements, Kant was a great mediator.

In Kant’s day –the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment– two diametrically opposed philosophical theories prevailed in Europe, each fighting for dominance over the other: Rationalism, which emerged in the previous century, championed by French philosopher René Descartes; and Empiricism, espoused by the Englishman John Locke. Descartes argued that human knowledge originates from reason, that ideas are innate to man, that the senses are not needed to learn. In stark contrast to Descartes’ famous dictum, “I think therefore I am,” were John Locke and his followers. For the empiricists, human knowledge originated from experience, because at birth the mind is a blank slate. Only that which is gleaned from our senses, perceptions, and impressions is real and can be said to exist.

Against this backdrop Kant emerges, a serene and methodical man, who was born in a quiet city in Prussia and died without ever having left it, who asserts in a conciliatory tone: there is no need for a heated argument, both sides are right –adding– but only in part, because “thoughts without content are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind.” Rather, the two complement each other: knowledge begins with experience and is supplemented by reason, that is, experience needs ideas.

But Kant extended himself beyond epistemology. He was the founder of the school known as Criticism, and based his best-known treatises on the critique, which he considered necessary in the progression toward perfecting pure theory. The first and most famous of the series was the Critique of Pure Reason, in which he reflects on the limits of reason, judgement, and human knowledge. The second in the series was the Critique of Practical Reason, in which he expounds his philosophy of morality, asserting that ethics are universal and autonomous, that is, they originate from within the individual, not from outside forces. This work was enormously influential on the development of Ethical theory.

To act ethically, Kant warns, we should treat humanity as an end in itself rather than as a means to other ends, and act as if our actions served as universal law. In short, act the way you believe everyone should act. His last book on criticism, the Critique of Judgement, which addresses religious themes, was written a few years after the death of Frederick William II of Prussia, who forbade him to write about religion.
Kant also left his mark on politics and legal theory. In The Metaphysics of Morals, he reflects on what is right and what is mandated by law. He proposed "that the welfare of each individual be properly regarded as an end in itself, and that the world progress toward a society in which reason binds every law giver to make laws in such a way that they could have sprung from the united will of an entire people."

Kant not only influenced domestic policy, but international policy as well. In Perpetual Peace, he determines how to ensure the welfare of the populace and how to achieve an alliance or federation of states that renounce a fraction of their sovereignty in order to live in peace. This essay planted the seed for the United Nations and eventually the European Union. He was not the only thinker who contemplated these issues, but he was one of the first.

Considering that only 70 years ago, Europe’s nations were engaged in a bloody, almost fratricidal war, we must recognise that, despite the shortcomings and deficiencies of the current Union of European States, the initiative to ensure peace and wellbeing has been effective. Such is the legacy of a man whose body never left his hometown, but whose mind travelled freely, transgressing prejudices as well as borders.