

Influential Thinkers

Information Cards

Influential Thinkers

Mencius

Mencius was a Chinese philosopher who was born circa 385BC.

He believed that people were born as good people but needed to make the right choices.

He believed that we had to think about what it meant to be a good person as we can't know or be taught what it means to be good in every situation.

He thought education was important as it would teach people to think about the world and help people to make the world a better place to live in.



Charles Darwin

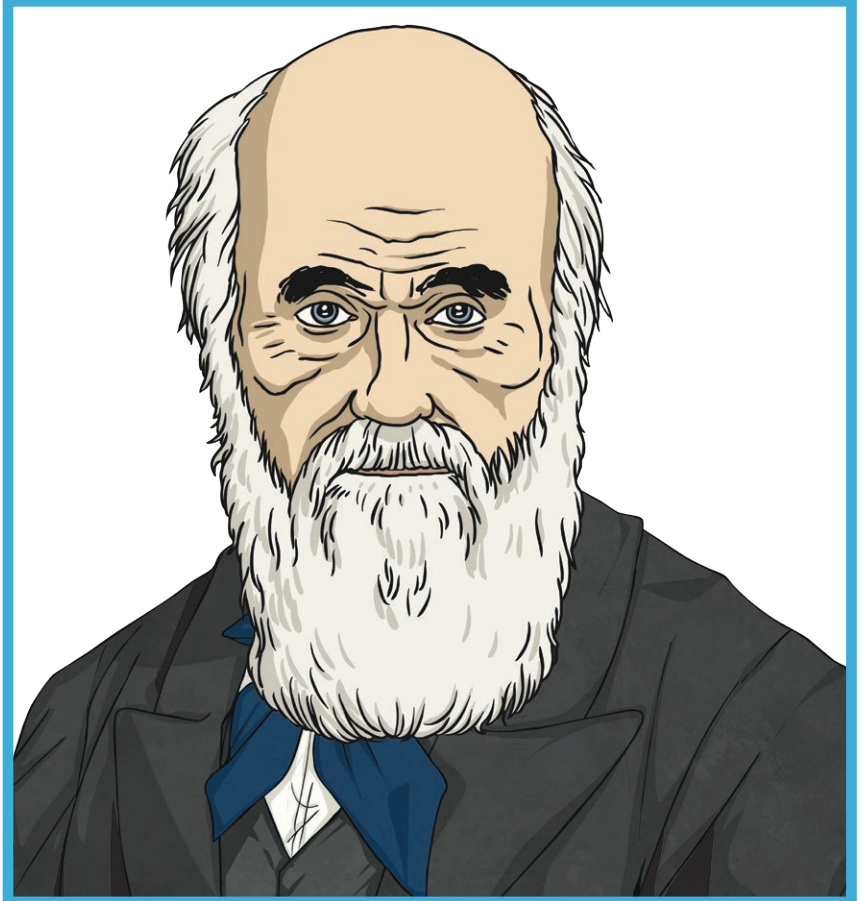
Darwin was a British scientist who was born in 1809 and died in 1882.

His greatest contribution was his book, 'On the Origin of the Species', which explains how living things developed and changed over time.

His ideas were not popular with as many people believed that God had created all living things, including humans, exactly as they were.

Darwin was brought up a Christian but called himself an agnostic in his later years.

In his book, 'The Descent of Man' he said that it was humans who worked out what was good and bad and this had occurred even before there were religions.



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Aphra Behn

Aphra Behn was born in England in 1640. She is thought to be the first English woman to earn her living as a writer.

She was against the transatlantic slave trade, which involved transporting and selling millions of Africans in North and South America.

She believed that being religious was not enough to be a good person.

She thought that people should be good because it was the right thing to do, not because they were afraid, or thought they would be punished by God.



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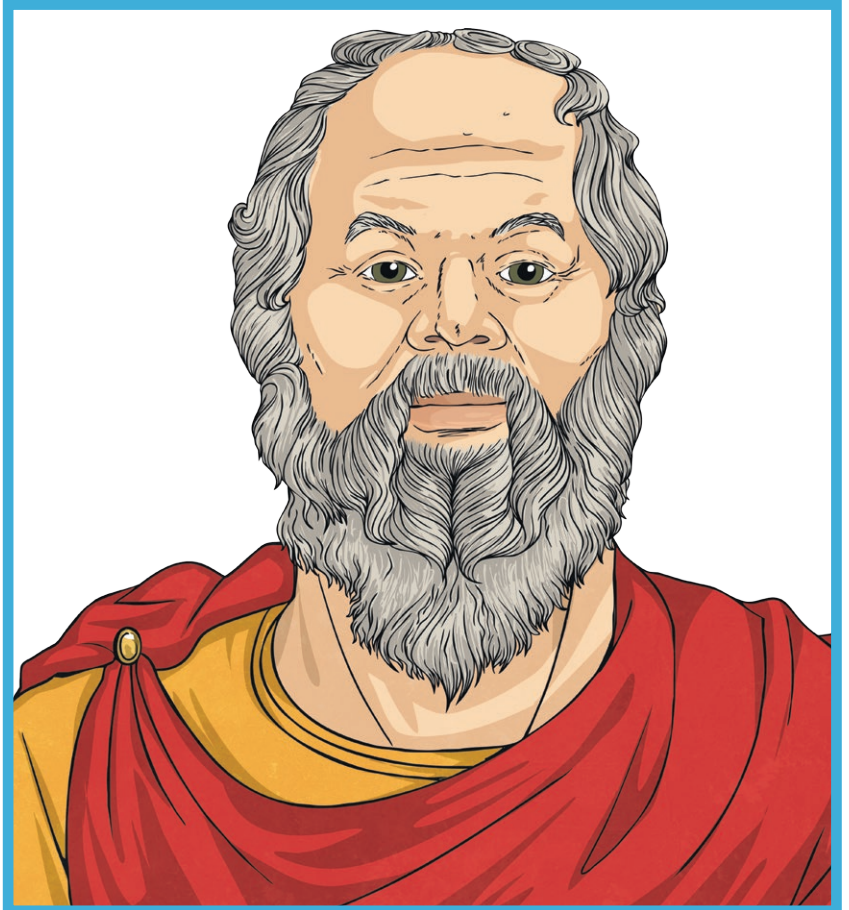
Socrates

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who was born in 469BC and died in 399BC.

He did believe in God but did not think the truth came from God or from a religion. He thought we needed to reason logically - that we should think - find out information and understand what is happening, not just guess or assume.

For example, if someone were to bump into you, it would be easy to think it was on purpose. However, if you stop and think, you could work out if that was true or if it was an accident. He thought we should do this all the time to make better choices and decisions.

He thought that a person should aim to be a 'good individual' as part of a society that is good.



Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft lived in eighteenth-century England at a time when women didn't have the same rights as men.

She wrote about why and how this was wrong. She spoke in favour of boys and girls being taught together in the same schools.

She argued that: "I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves."

She thought women should be allowed to enter professions like medicine, which at the time they were not allowed to do.

She felt strongly that we should think and live our lives independently, without relying on a god.



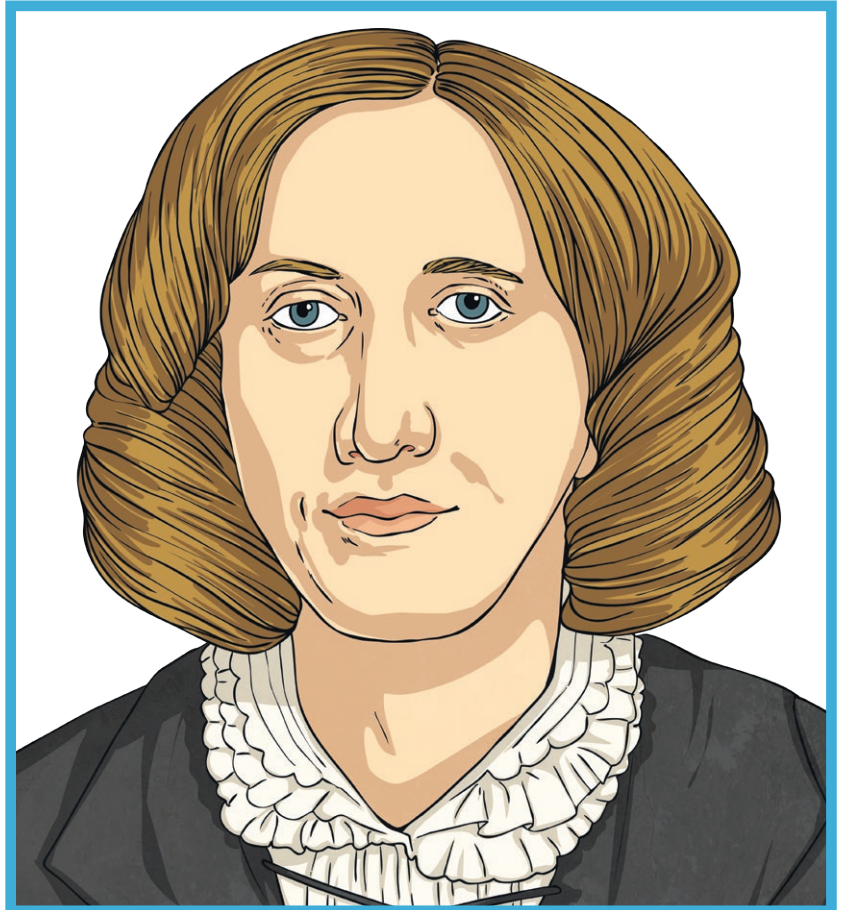
George Eliot

George Eliot's real name was Marian Evans. She was an author who lived in the 19th century (1819 -1880). She had to use a male name to be able to get her writing published.

She believed in equal rights for men and women.

Eliot did not believe in religion or the idea of an afterlife. She read widely before coming to this conclusion. She explored ideas about how it was possible to be good without believing in God.

She thought that we should aim to make the world "less difficult" for one another by helping each other. To do this, people had to learn to empathise (understand one another's points of view) and believed that being human did involve making mistakes and learning from them.



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Epicurus

Epicurus was born in 341BC and lived in Athens in ancient Greece. It was normal at that time to treat some people differently, especially women. They also believed that some people were inferior (worse than others) and so believed it was acceptable to have slaves.

Epicurus disagreed with these ideas and thought everyone should be treated equally.

He did not think that the world was designed by a god.

He believed that by living a peaceful life, people would be happier. He thought this would also help people to respect each other.



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Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine was born in 1737 in Thetford, England but moved to the British colonies in America (which were later to become the United States of America).

“My country is the world; my religion is to do good,” is a famous quote of his. It shows that he did not believe in any particular religion, although he was a deist (someone who believes that a God exists based on the wonder of the natural world).

He believed that all people should have rights. This included the right to an education, a job that pays fairly and help if a person can't work because they are sick or have lost their job. He also thought everyone should have a pension, which is an amount of money to be given to someone once they are too old to work. We have all of these rights but when he was alive, this was not the case. It was because he wrote and argued for these ideas in pamphlets and books that they were eventually adopted in many countries around the world.



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David Hume

David Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1711.

He was an empiricist. This means he argued that we should only believe those things for which we have good evidence. He didn't believe in miracles for this reason.

He was an atheist but couldn't be one openly in a religious society. He did argue that being religious didn't mean that a person was good - that was a label. It was the way we act that made the difference.

He believed that we should sympathise with others and be kind to each other.

He thought making good choices was important but not the only thing that would lead to becoming a good person. He thought our character (existence of qualities such as honesty, loyalty and courage) was important too.



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Marie Curie

Marie Curie was born in what is now Poland in 1867. She went to France to gain a scientific education and became a researcher.

She married her husband Pierre, who was also a scientist, in a simple civil (non-religious) ceremony as neither believed in religion.

She felt strongly that we should learn about and understand the world that we live in using the scientific method. This meant testing ideas to see if they were true. She thought this would help improve the way humans lived their lives which would also help improve society.

She thought that we all have a duty to help others and her work on radiation and x-rays, which earned her two Nobel Prizes, was based on her belief that we should do things that are good for all human beings and not just ourselves.



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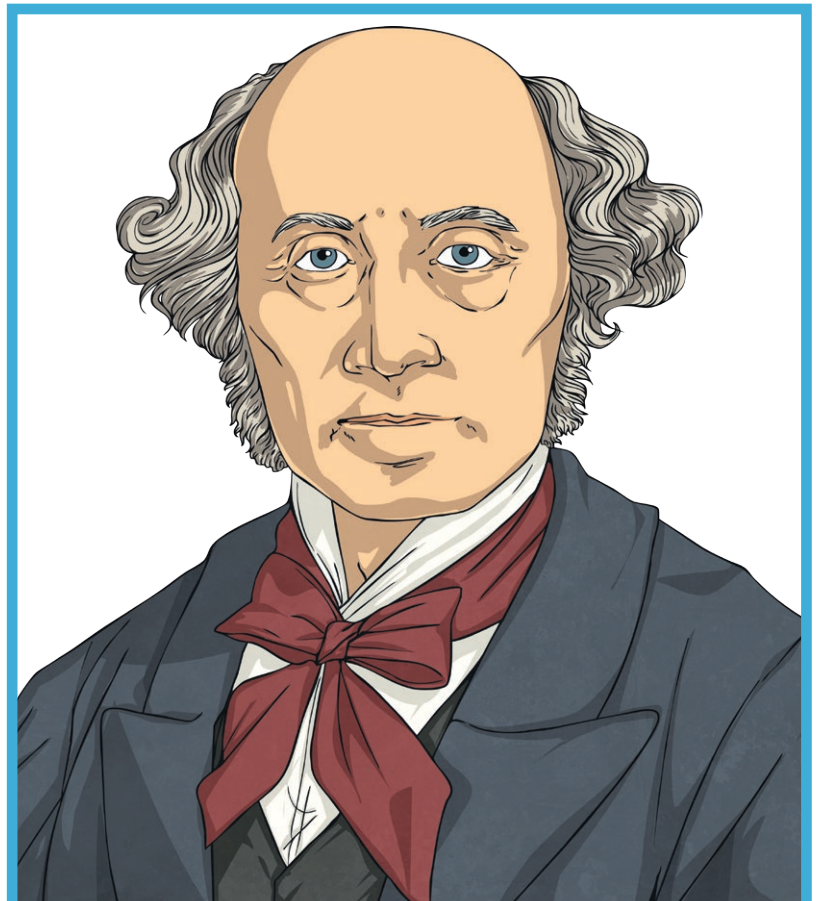
John Stuart Mill

J.S. Mill was a thinker and writer born in 1809.

He tried to find ways of working out how it was possible to be good. After much deep thought, he argued that an action was 'right' if it provided the maximum happiness among the greatest number of people.

In addition, he believed that people should have freedom. The government or people in power should only tell people what to do in order to protect everyone from harm.

He observed that all societies had a common set of ideas and beliefs about what was right and wrong, despite having very different cultures and religions. He didn't think religion was necessary and instead he believed that it was the duty of every person to serve humanity (all human beings living) and think of the general good rather than just their own selfish needs.



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Confucius

Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived around 500BCE.

He believed it was possible to have moral values that did not depend on the existence of a god.

He argued that “the true way” to live was by reciprocity. This means that we should treat others the way we would want to be treated ourselves.

He thought it was important to show kindness, respect for others, and solve problems by thinking about them deeply and understanding what caused them.

