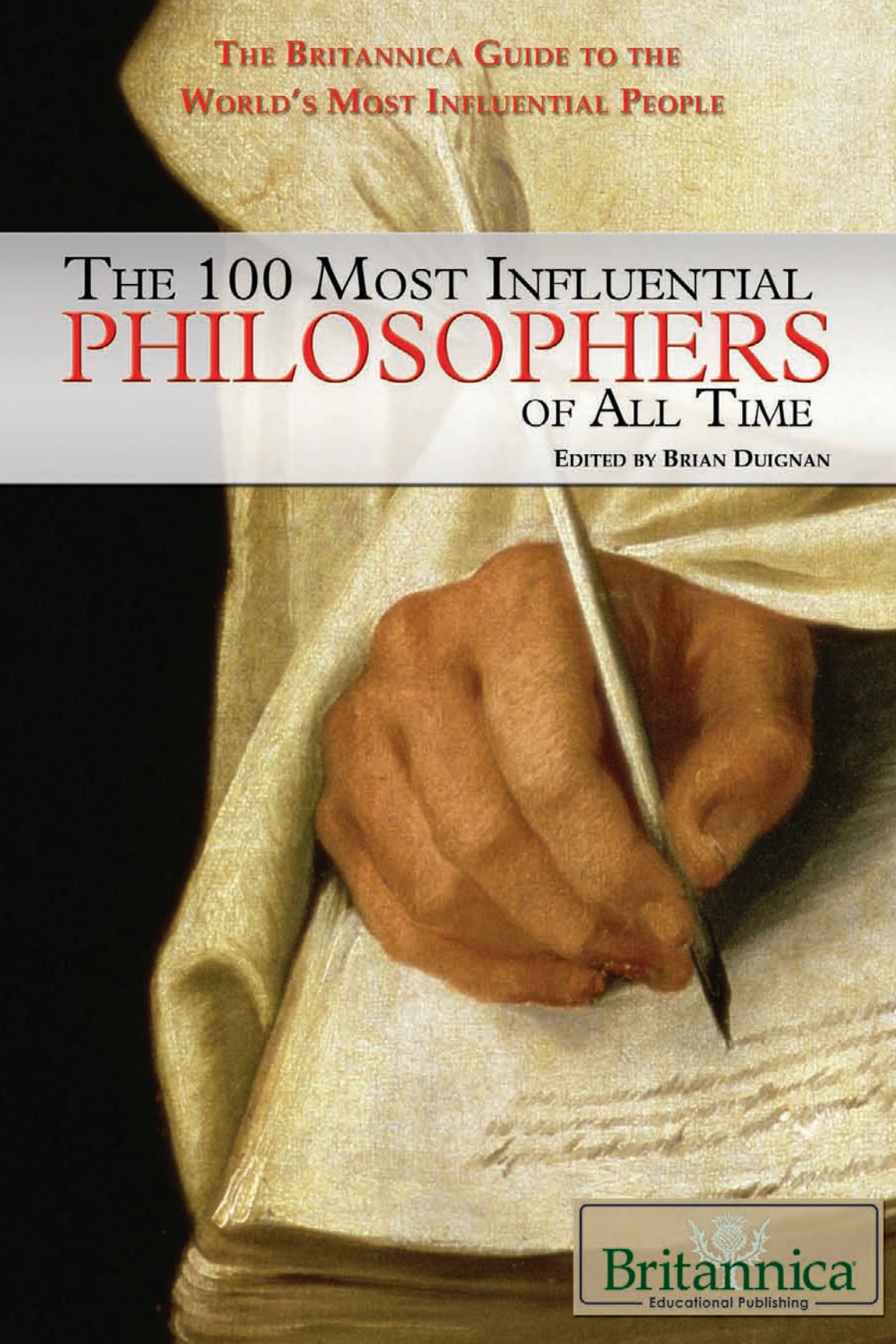
THE BRITANNICA GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

THE 100 MOST INFLUENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS OF ALL TIME

EDITED BY BRIAN DUIGNAN



Britannica
Educational Publishing

The 100 Most Influential PHILOSOPHERS of All Time

THE BRITANNICA GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

THE 100 MOST INFLUENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS OF ALL TIME

EDITED BY BRIAN DUIGNAN, SENIOR EDITOR, RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Britannica
Educational Publishing
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
ROSEN
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Published in 2010 by Britannica Educational Publishing
(a trademark of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.)
in association with Rosen Educational Services, LLC
29 East 21st Street, New York, NY 10010.

Distributed exclusively by Rosen Educational Services.
For a listing of additional Britannica Educational Publishing titles, call toll free (800) 237-9932.

First Edition

Britannica Educational Publishing
Michael I. Levy: Executive Editor
Marilyn L. Barton: Senior Coordinator, Production Control
Steven Bosco: Director, Editorial Technologies
Lisa S. Braucher: Senior Producer and Data Editor
Yvette Charboneau: Senior Copy Editor
Kathy Nakamura: Manager, Media Acquisition
Brian Duignan: Senior Editor, Religion and Philosophy

Rosen Educational Services
Jeanne Nagle: Senior Editor
Nelson Sa: Art Director
Nicole Russo: Designer
Introduction by Stephanie Watson

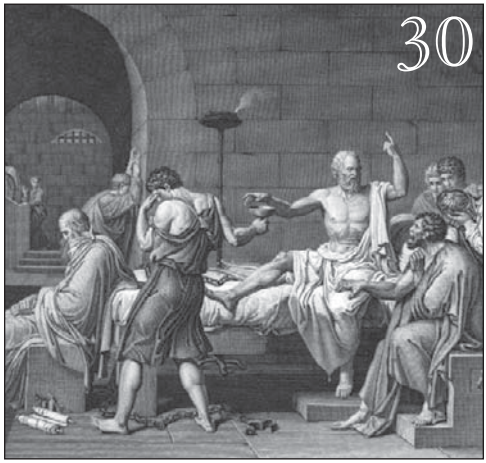
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

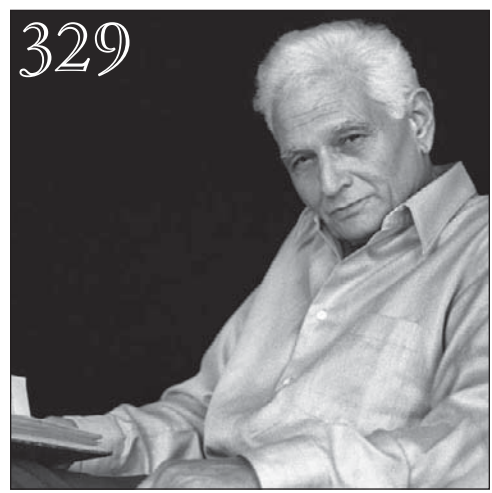
The 100 most influential philosophers of all time / edited by Brian Duignan.—1st ed.
p. cm.—(The Britannica guide to the world's most influential people)
"In association with Britannica Educational Publishing, Rosen Educational Services."
Includes Index.
ISBN 978-1-61530-057-0 (eBook)
1. Philosophy. 2. Philosophers. I. Duignan, Brian. II. Title: One hundred most influential philosophers of all time.
B72.A15 2010
109.2—dc22

2009029773

Cover credit: Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, Spain/The Bridgeman Art Library/Getty Images

CONTENTS





Introduction

Life doesn't come with an instruction manual. Each person is released into the world in the same way, naked and unaware, left to find his or her own way to some sort of understanding about the mysteries of their own existence. Once people grow and learn enough, they naturally start asking questions. How did the world—and universe—come to exist? Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? What happens after I die? People began their search for meaning very early on in the course of human history. The ancient Greeks developed an entire mythology of gods and goddesses to answer many of life's most fundamental questions.

Yet there were some who were not satisfied with the explanation that every major human event, from birth to death, was dictated by the whims of the gods. Men like Plato (429–347 BCE), Socrates (469–399 BCE), and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) preferred a more rational approach. Long before the age of modern science, they used reason to understand why things happened as they did, and to find some sort of order and security in what was an often chaotic and dangerous world. They questioned, probed, and refused to accept commonly held beliefs. Through their teachings, they became the towering figures of ancient Greek philosophy.

Theories of existence, knowledge, and ethics have been advanced and argued since the time of the ancient Greeks. Travelling through the pages of this book, you will discover the ideas that shaped the history of philosophy, and the men—and women—who gave birth to those ideas. In addition to Plato and Socrates, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Arthur Schopenhauer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir are just a few of the philosophic luminaries profiled in this title.

In the simplest terms, philosophy is about thinking. French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) defined

his entire existence in those terms. "I think, therefore I am," he famously proclaimed. The concept of a philosopher practicing his craft might bring to mind the famous Auguste Rodin sculpture, *The Thinker*, which depicts a man with chin on hand in deep contemplation. Yet philosophers do much more than sit around thinking and asking questions. They engage in fundamental discussions about nature, society, science, psychology, and ethics. They develop critical ideas about the way people live, and the way they should live.

There are three major fields of philosophical investigation. The first is ontology, which is the study of existence—what applies neutrally to everything that is real. Some of the earliest philosophers attributed human existence to the natural elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The Greek philosopher Heracleitus (lived around 500 BCE) thought it was fire that was the essential material uniting all things. The opposing forces of igniting and extinguishing fire gave balance and order to an otherwise random and disordered world.

The Greek scholar Democritus (*c.* 460–*c.* 370 BCE) found the basis of life in an element of a different kind—the atom. He believed not only that atoms made up everything in the universe, but also that the movement of atoms was responsible for every change or event that occurred (he had unknowingly discovered the foundation of modern physics). Democritus assumed that because atoms cannot be created or destroyed, nothing (and no one) can die in the absolute sense.

Other philosophers have claimed that the basis of all things is not elements, but mathematics. Pythagoras (*c.* 570–*c.* 490 BCE), familiar to high school math students for the theorem of right triangles ($a^2 + b^2 = c^2$) that's associated with his name, surmised that numbers gave an underlying harmony and order to everything in existence.

When it came to answering the question of existence, philosophy and religion often overlap. Some philosophers believed firmly in the religious ideal of God as the creator of all things. They have even used philosophy to prove the existence of God. The Archbishop St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 CE) argued that God must exist because it is impossible for humans to conceive of the greatest possible being as not existing. St. Augustine (354–430 CE) claimed that it is only through the contemplation of, and connection with, God that humans can find real happiness.

Other thinkers used philosophy for the opposite purpose—to dispute the ideas of religion and God. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) believed that the highest task of human existence was to become oneself in an ethical and religious sense. In part, he called faith irrational, and said people should take personal responsibility for their own destinies rather than simply follow the flock.

Philosophy and religion also have many differences of opinion when it comes to another theme in the search for the origins of human existence—the soul. Some religious belief holds that the body is just a container of sorts, which temporarily holds the essence of a person, which is deemed his or her soul. After death (if the person has behaved well in life), the soul supposedly goes on to a better place, which the Judeo-Christian religion has termed "heaven." Philosophers have had their own conceptions of the soul's purpose and journey. Plato saw it as immortal, while Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) said that once the body died, the soul was gone too. French Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) held that there is no God, and therefore human beings were not designed for any particular purpose. The only thing that truly exists, he said, is the way things appear to us, or our perception of things.

The second field of philosophical investigation, epistemology, involves the study of knowledge—how we know what we know. It might seem as though people who sit around thinking all the time would know a great deal. However, the more philosophers pondered, the more they realized how little they actually understood. This led to questioning about the very origins of knowledge.

Socrates was a firm believer that people didn't know as much as they claimed they did. He was masterful at putting his students on the spot. Socrates' technique, called the Socratic method, was to ask his students a question, such as "What is knowledge?" or "What is virtue?" Then he would proceed to poke holes in their responses until they questioned their own understanding of the topic. In one conversation captured in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates relentlessly challenged the dramatist Agathon over the ideas of desire and love, until Agathon finally conceded his position, saying, "It turns out, Socrates, I didn't know what I was talking about in that speech."

How we obtain knowledge also has been the subject of some debate among philosophers. While Plato believed that people are born with some knowledge of an ideal reality (and it is the philosophers' job to show them how to live in accordance with that reality), John Locke (1632–1704) felt that babies are merely blank slates, waiting to be filled with the knowledge gained from experience and observation. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) agreed with the importance of observation. In fact, he suggested that every philosopher who had come before him had been wrong by focusing on words rather than on experimentation. Bacon's empirical approach to knowledge formed the foundation of the modern scientific method.

Yet there were some philosophers who questioned the validity of observation, arguing that people couldn't always

trust their senses. Pyrrhon of Elis (360—270 BCE) and his fellow Skeptics believed that truth is unknowable, therefore nothing is as it seems. If we can't trust what we see, hear, smell, and feel, how can we be sure of anything? What we think we are experiencing in life might be nothing more than a dream.

The final of these three fields of investigation is ethics, also known as the study of values, or put simply, deciding what is right and what is wrong. The fundamental nature of humankind has long challenged the great philosophers. Are people born inherently good, evil, or somewhere in between? Is human nature predetermined by a supernatural being or self-directed? These ethical questions are crucial to systems of government and justice, determining the way people should live together in society, and when and how punishment should be meted out to those who don't follow what is considered the "right" way to behave.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) said that good and evil can be derived from pleasure or pain. People's actions are not morally good or evil. It's how they are perceived that makes them that way. So if someone commits murder, the act itself has no significance other than that society views it as evil. German Existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who felt the idea of morality was something invented by the "herd" (society, community, family, the church), said people should throw out the ideas of good and evil as mere conventions, and instead create their own individual value systems.

Some philosophers, among them a member of the French Enlightenment named Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), felt that human nature is inherently good, but people become corrupted when they stifle their natural desires to fit within the confines of society's rules and order. This repression is what ultimately leads to bad behaviour.

Are there ultimate rewards for following the rules, and punishments for failing to behave according to society's dictates? In the Judeo-Christian tradition, heaven awaits those who are "good," while hell lies below to capture those who are "bad." In Indian religion and philosophy, the idea of karma dictates that every action people take—good or bad—will determine what happens to them down the road. According to this idea, if you help an old woman cross the road, supposedly good things will be coming your way, either in this lifetime or the next (reincarnation is part of this belief). Steal money from a friend, and you might be coming back in the next life as a dung beetle.

The ideas of right and wrong extend to the political systems that govern people, and the way in which they should be ruled. Philosophers such as Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) felt that people are inherently weak, and therefore need strong, even despotic leaders who rule by fear and intimidation. (The term "Machiavellian" has come to refer to unscrupulous or deceptive behaviours.) In contrast to these ideas are the teachings of Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), who believed that those in power should treat their subjects kindly in order to earn their respect.

These and the other great thinkers whose lives and beliefs are detailed in these pages have helped give shape and depth to human existence. And yet philosophy is a constantly evolving science. Just as some questions are addressed, new questions emerge. Expect the list of influential philosophers to grow over the years as people continue to probe and wonder about the great mysteries of the universe and human existence.