# A HISTORY OF HUMANIST THOUGHT

The word 'humanist' describes a non-religious person who believes in using reason, evidence, and empathy to make sense of the world, and to decide how to act. We have only been calling these people 'humanists' for around 100 years, but there have always been people thinking and acting in ways we would today describe as humanist - for thousands of years in fact.

These people looked to what they could see and experience to make sense of the world. They thought about ways to live well together with other people, and about how to be happy. They focused on what could be done while they were alive on earth, rather than imagining another life after they died. Many humanists today see them as part of the humanist tradition.

ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN ROOTS

In Europe, our written record of humanist thinking begins with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans. **Protagoras** (c. 490–420 BCE) expressed an early form of what would later be known as 'agnosticism': stating that the existence of gods could not be known. **Democritus** (c. 460–370 BCE), known as the 'laughing philosopher', developed the theory that everything in the world was made up from tiny 'atoms'.
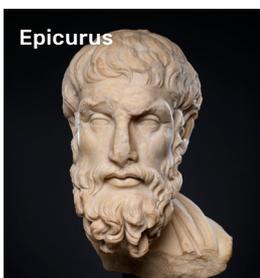
Epicurus

His thinking influenced another important Greek philosopher, **Epicurus** (341–270 BCE), who believed that happiness was the main goal of life. This could be found through friendship, time in nature, and the appreciation of simple pleasures.

Epicurus' ideas were spread to a Roman audience by poet **Lucretius** (99-55 BCE), whose long poem 'On the Nature of Things' brought together the ideas of Democritus and Epicurus. At the heart of it was the idea that the world could be explained through reason and observation, and did not need gods to make sense of it.

THE HUMANIST TRADITION IN INDIA

During the sixth century BCE, Hinduism was the main religion in India, and many people believed in a soul, separate from the body, that would be reborn after death. The **Charvakas** (also known as Lokayata, or 'Worldly Ones' in Sanskrit) rejected these ideas completely, instead believing in materialism: that only what could be physically experienced in the material world was real. Although records on Charvakas and their founder are scarce, the philosophy is believed to date from as early as 600 BCE.

ANCIENT CHINA

Confucius, who gave his name to the school of thought known as 'Confucianism', was born in 551 BCE in eastern China, and died in 479 BCE. Although he is viewed as one of China's most influential thinkers, Confucius himself drew on a tradition long-present in Chinese culture. His teachings focused on ethical living, and the idea that anyone (not just people born rich or noble) could be good, kind, and just. He placed the responsibility for maintaining harmony in the world primarily on human beings, and advocated a golden rule: *'what you would not want for yourself, do not do to others'*.

Mencius

A loyal and influential follower of Confucius was Meng-tzu (or **Mencius**), c. 371-289 BCE. Mencius taught that all human beings were inherently good, but he understood the effect of other factors on how easy (or hard) it was for them to live virtuous lives. Therefore, Mencius believed that people needed to practise goodness, and to work to build an environment which might help others to be good.
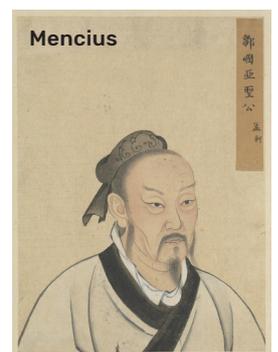
For many hundreds of years in Europe, in what is known as the 'middle' or **'dark' ages**, it was very dangerous to express humanist ideas, because criticising the Church or saying you didn't believe in God was against the law. Because of this, although people may have believed in humanist ideas - and lived humanist lives - we don't have much evidence for it.

THOMAS HOBBES (1588-1679)

Thomas Hobbes was a historian and philosopher, who was interested in how religious ideas came to exist. In 1651, he published a book called *Leviathan*, in which he wondered whether religion might be linked to fear of what we cannot see or understand. Today, we might call Thomas Hobbes a 'freethinker': someone who is willing to question traditional ideas, and to think for themselves.

During a period called the **Renaissance**, the ideas of the ancient thinkers began to be rediscovered. This gave way in the 17th and 18th centuries to the **Age of Enlightenment**, which focused on using human reason to gain knowledge, and improve society. New discoveries in science helped to build a greater understanding of the world, and travel allowed us to learn from other countries and cultures. Although it could still be dangerous, many thinkers started to question religion: asking where it came from, and whether its claims were true.

Mary Wollstonecraft
by John Opie, c. 1797 © National Portrait Gallery, London

They questioned other things too. **Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–1797), for example, was a writer and teacher who asked why women in the 18th century received less education than men. She believed that only by being able to use their own reason - and act freely – could people live truly good lives.

QUESTION:
What other figures from history do you think humanists today might consider part of the humanist tradition?

AUGUSTE COMTE (1798–1857)

Auguste Comte was a French philosopher, who created what was called the 'religion of humanity'. This was focused on bringing people together to celebrate the achievements of human beings, rather than to worship a god. He also invented the word 'altruism', which meant doing things selflessly for others. Comte's was a humanist philosophy, rooted in human beings' ability to live well without any supernatural ideas.

The **nineteenth century** was a time of enormous change and major discovery. New scientific understanding (like **Charles Darwin**'s theory of evolution) helped to provide explanations for the world based on science and evidence. New philosophical ideas, like **utilitarianism**, gave people ways to make moral decisions based on reason, compassion, and thinking about what the result of an action might be. Utilitarians believed that ethical decisions should be based on what would lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Many humanists today are still influenced by this idea.

Writers like **George Eliot** *(pictured)* and **Thomas Hardy** began expressing humanist ideas and themes through their literature. Humanists were also active in challenging traditional sources of power. When governments tried to prevent challenges to their rule, many humanists worked to defend freedom of speech and of the press, believing that being allowed to question authority was a human right.

Towards the end of the 19th century, groups called ethical societies began to form in the UK. They were influenced by an American social reformer called **Felix Adler**, who had started a society in New York with the motto 'deed not creed', meaning you did not have to be religious to do good in the world. He hoped to join people of all beliefs together in living good lives, and working for change. The first ethical society in England was the London Ethical Society, which began in 1886. They believed in 'well-being and well-doing': happiness and good deeds. Ten years later, in 1896, some of these groups joined together to form the Union of Ethical Societies, the organisation that would eventually become Humanists UK.