Lincoln Douglas- Important Philosophers

For those with the intention of having great success in Lincoln-Douglas Debate, there is a commonly accepted set of “key philosophers” which will be seen quite often. While the list could be expanded on forever, ones that every debater need to know for sure are:

A) John Locke- Thomas Jefferson once called this man, “one of the three greatest men to ever live.” His concepts are found all over in American Democracy. He came up with the concept of natural rights, such as “life, liberty, and property.” He also wrote an extensive amount on the way Democratic governments should be formed, much of which should seem pretty familiar. His theories will invariably emerge in any debate topic that centers on politics, governments, or justice. His main work (at least as far as debate is concerned) is the Second Treatise on Government which basically serves as his Social Contract Theory (a common term seen a lot that has to do with the relationship/obligations between individuals and the government).

B) Thomas Hobbes- Imagine the exact opposite of John Locke. Thomas Hobbes is most famous for suggesting that the State of Nature (anarchy) is a place where all people are brutish and will easily kill everybody. He sees this as the worst possible evil of all time so suggests, in his form of the Social Contract, that the Government is basically all powerful. Basically, Hobbes was for a totalitarian government where people have very few rights to go against the government. He is also important for using his one theory that we all have the right to self-defense (because life is the most important). His
most important work is The Leviathan, though I personally like The Citizen the best.

C) Jean-Jacques Rousseau- Rousseau is a philosopher that is very hard to sum up in a few sentences. More than any other philosopher I know, his quotes out of context seem a lot crazier than they do in context of what he is saying. His ideals of representative government can be good for debates on justice/obligations of the state because a lot of what he has said serves in the basis for America as well. Though not to the extent of John Locke. Judges will often buy into more American-style arguments. Basically, the General Will (not necessarily the majority will but the will of society as it is best for them--decisions they all would make if they were perfectly rational) should guide the government’s actions. His work The Social Contract explains his Social Contract Theory quite well.

D) Immanuel Kant- The philosopher who debaters have the hardest time grasping. His writing is very dense and interpretations of what he means vary greatly. Kant is primarily a moral philosopher and he gives the most-common usage of Means-Based morality: The Categorical Imperative. Actions are good or bad in and of themselves, regardless of the impact (or ends) that they have on society. While he has three “maxims” to it which debaters might want to have handy if they think they will need them, it is easiest to sum Kant up in these three points instead. First, for an action to be moral it has to have good intentions, but just because it has good intentions does not make it automatically good. Second, “treat each person as an end in himself” refers to the idea that one cannot ever directly harm somebody; they cannot kill or lie to get a better end. Thirdly, universalize the golden rule. Ask, “if
everybody did this action (forget the consequences—just the action itself) in the entire world, would everything be ok?" Imagine killing a person to save more. Would it be ok for everybody to kill a person? That is an obvious no. For an action to be moral, it has to meet all three of these points. Finally, Immanuel Kant was a big fan of the Death Penalty. It is dense, but check out his Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals.

**E) John Stuart Mill** - The man who saved Utilitarianism (the idea that all actions should promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people) from falling out of common usage. While people had talked about this theory for years before his time, his usage is the most common and the most agreed upon. Generally, for every moral choice one should ask themselves what will happen. It is commonly attacked for being vague and up to interpretation, but there are a lot of serious arguments for why this moral philosophy is superior to a means-based one like Kant’s (means-based = deontological; ends-based = consequentialist). This theory is found in his book Utilitarianism. Another common usage of John Stuart Mill, found in his book On Liberty, is the notion that Liberty (that which affects an individual but does not affect society) should be supreme where we can do so without negatively affecting others. He also makes a strong argument at the end of this book on behalf of education.

**F) Rule Utilitarianism** - This is a theory which is ends-based, but quite similar to one of the maxims of Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative (that of the universal rule). Whilst we should all act with the ends in mind, it is imperative that we not take this to the extreme and be subjective with our usage. Therefore, general rules are created
based upon what “generally” promotes the best ends and what does not. While it is still not a clear-cut, laid-out list of rules, it does get rid of a lot of the subjectivity found with other Utilitarianism (called Act Utilitarianism- where each action is judged separately).

**Others to check out:**

G) Thomas Aquinas (Doctrine of the Double Effect)

H) Aristotle

I) John Rawls (particularly his theory of the Veil of Ignorance)

J) Jeremy Bentham (Utilitarianism)