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# IONEERS OF EVOLUTION

FROM THALES TO HUXLEY

WITH

AN INTERMEDIATE CHAPTER ON THE CAUSES OF  
ARREST OF THE MOVEMENT

BY

EDWARD CLODD

(Author of "*The Childhood of the World*," "*The Story of Creation*," "*Thomas  
Henry Huxley*," etc., etc.)

ISSUED FOR THE RATIONALIST PRESS ASSOCIATION, LTD., BY ARRANGEMENT  
WITH MR. GRANT RICHARDS)

WATTS & CO.,  
7, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET, LONDON, E.C.

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TO MY BELOVED

A. A. L.,

WHOSE FELLOWSHIP AND HELP

HAVE

SWEETENED LIFE

## PREFACE

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THIS book needs only brief introduction. It attempts to tell the story of the origin of the Evolution idea in Ionia, and, after long arrest, of the revival of that idea in modern times, when its profound and permanent influence on thought in all directions, and, therefore, on human relations and conduct, is apparent.

Between birth and revival there were the centuries of suspended animation, when the nepenthe of dogma drugged the reason; the Church teaching, and the laity mechanically accepting, the sufficiency of the Scriptures and of the General Councils to decide on matters which lie outside the domain of both. Hence the necessity for particularising the causes which actively arrested advance in knowledge for sixteen hundred years.

In indicating the parts severally played in the Renaissance of Evolution by a small group of illustrious men, the writer, through the courtesy of Mr. Herbert Spencer, has been permitted to see the original documents, which show that the theory of Evolution as a whole—*i.e.*, as dealing with the non-living, as well as

the living, contents of the Universe—was formulated by Mr. Spencer in the year preceding the publication of the *Origin of Species*.

ROSEMONT, TUFNELL PARK, LONDON, N.

*14th December, 1896.*

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## *A Brief Statement of the Objects and Methods of the Association.*

### The "Spirit of Rationalism."

The prevalence of the "spirit of Rationalism," as Mr. Lecky has called it, is one of the chief features distinguishing modern from mediæval thought and life. This spirit has permeated all nations and all classes comprised in the world of Western civilisation. It is not any definite and reasoned doctrine, but simply a sceptical attitude towards magic and miracles, assumptions of occult power and insight on the part of men, and alleged divine interferences.

We believe that this spirit of Rationalism is closely connected with the progress of modern science and critical research. The "spirit" assumes unconsciously and as a general, practical rule that uniformity of nature which science and research repeatedly prove to exist in particular cases. In other words, it assumes that exceptional occurrences are due to unfamiliar combinations of familiar conditions, and do not require superhuman conscious agency to account for them. But the spirit of Rationalism is, after all, only a mental tendency. As such, it is liable to exist in the modern mind side by side with the supernaturalism of a pre-scientific age. It does so conspicuously under present-day Protestantism. Most Protestants are Rationalists in their attitude towards contemporary instances of alleged miracle and inspiration. They are Rationalists in their attitude towards the sacred literatures of Buddhists, Brahmans, Parsees, and Mohammedans, and towards the distinctive teachings of the Church of Rome. As regards the narrative and theology contained in the Bible, however, they are not Rationalists, but at best compromisers between traditional reverence and scientific inquiry. Thus, while the spirit of Rationalism is rife, the attempt to raise Rationalism into a consistent rule of the intellectual life is extremely unpopular, having to face both active opposition and widespread indifference. That, nevertheless, is the aim of the Rationalist Press Association, Limited.

### **Embodiment of the Rationalistic Spirit.**

The physical sciences are, within their respective limits, the most consistent embodiments of the spirit of Rationalism. Astronomy, geology, and biology have successively broken away from Biblical tradition. They have become genuine sciences through an exercise of the freest and most serious inquiry, combined with the expectation of discovering natural uniformities where men formerly saw nothing but supernatural mysteries. But the special sciences belong primarily to specialists. What the average thinking man requires is a good synopsis of the object-matter and results of science, an insight into its nature and methods, and a habit of mind which will enable him to form sensible and serviceable judgments as to the many questions which cannot yet (and perhaps never can) be decided with scientific accuracy.

Thus the spirit of Rationalism has needed to embody itself, not only in science and exact research, but in certain types of human thought which form, as it were, the atmosphere of science. Among the more highly-cultivated intellects it has given rise to the various schools of modern philosophy. Among the people and certain of their democratic leaders it has given rise to the various parties of modern Freethought. Philosophy is, on the whole, somewhat conservative, although it is far more anxious to conserve the wide outlook of Plato and Aristotle than the theology of Paul and Augustine. The tendency of popular Freethought is more revolutionary and impatient for a new start in human ideas. With the spread of education and democracy, however, these two types of advanced thought must increasingly coalesce. In coalescing, Freethought should gain breadth of view and lose the "scoffing" habit which only hardens foes and alienates many who would otherwise be friends. Philosophy, on the other hand, should gain a certain downrightness and relation to practical life which it generally lacks, and at the same time learn to relinquish such speculations as are not even possessed of probability in the light of experience and science. To temper Freethought with philosophy, and to assist in freeing philosophy from all academic trammels and fanciful excrescences, are among the objects for which the R. P. A. has been formed.

### **The Limits of Compromise.**

The semi-philosophic works which have acquired wide popularity in recent years are those which have set forth some new compromise (or what has really amounted to a compromise) between certain tenets of Christianity and certain views of modern science. We believe that this accommodating spirit, though a long way in advance of the spirit of sheer intolerance, lags equally far behind the philosophic spirit of truth seeking.

Compromise is inevitable, and, to a certain extent, salutary, in politics. This is because political measures have to be adjusted to the existing views of the most influential body of citizens, no matter whether those views be sound or the reverse. But the very fact which makes compromise legitimate in politics makes it illegitimate as regards religious and abstract social questions. Thus a consistent Rationalism is the direct antithesis, the uncompromising rejection, of that religious faith which deems it necessary to accept traditional and reputedly sacred opinions, without seriously inquiring into their evidential value. In saying this, we do not, of course, mean that all traditional religious opinions are necessarily to be rejected, nor do we pretend to be in a position to teach the whole philosophy of Rationalism. That is still in the making, and it is that which the R. P. A. must help, directly or indirectly, to make. Our contention is that the appeal to experience and reason must alone decide what elements of traditional Christianity are worthy to be retained, and that theological dogmas and scriptural prejudices must be

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allowed no more influence over the philosophic thinker than has the legend of creation contained in the book of Genesis over the present-day astronomer or geologist.

After careful consideration, aided by the advice of several well-known thinkers, the following definition of Rationalism has been adopted and embodied in the Memorandum of Association:—

*“Rationalism may be defined as the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority.”*

In making direct mention of ethics we wish to accentuate the fact that the philosophy of Rationalism cannot fail to have important bearings on human conduct, which will, we believe, be far more beneficent in the long run than those of traditional theology.

### **The Need of Propaganda.**

Although the spirit of Rationalism has permeated the Protestant clergy, conforming and non-conformist alike, and, in many cases, the preachers are more liberal-minded than their flocks, professional needs naturally make them, as a body, hostile to Rationalism in any consistent shape. They and their lay supporters spare neither pains nor money in promulgating views which, though differing widely according to the church or sect from which they proceed, agree in attributing unique authority and surpassing excellence to the Christian religion, and defending, rather than dispassionately inquiring into, its supposed essentials. Many powerful associations, among which the Religious Tract Society and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge are perhaps the most widely known, are carried on largely with the object of vindicating Christian tradition against Rationalist criticism.

Philosophic Rationalists, on the other hand, have been disposed to trust to the progress of science and the ultimate triumph of truth, and have made comparatively little effort to propagate their opinions. It is believed that the R. P. A. will be a means of arousing and directing the energies of such torpid sympathisers. Concerted action among Rationalists was never more needed than now, in face of the present widespread reaction towards relatively irrational beliefs and practices. This reaction shows itself in the disposition to assert the sufficiency of instinct and sentiment, as well as to magnify the claims of custom, ritual, and authority, while making light of reason, evading the duty of critical inquiry, and ignoring the need of a broad human and scientific outlook, such as constructive philosophic thought alone can give.

The cause of Rationalism cannot be assisted more materially than by promoting the publication and distribution of works which the organised weight of religious prejudice, the stolid indifference of the general public to philosophic inquiry, and the consequent policy of the popular press and the booksellers, all tend to discourage, if not to taboo—provided, of course, that such works have intrinsic value.

### **Publications of the R. P. A., Ltd.**

Works of a serious, and especially those of a seriously philosophic character, are heavily handicapped in the competition for popular favour. Still more is this the case when such works soberly advocate unpopular views. The notion that the most successful books are the best may be partially true as regards works of imagination. It is very far indeed from being true as regards works of research and reflection.

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In these cases the author has usually to publish the book at his own expense, and, even should it acquire a steady sale, it is long before the outlay is recouped. If he cannot make the outlay, the probability is that his book, even though valuable in itself, will never see the light. Recognising these facts, the R. P. A. seeks to afford practical encouragement to authors, and especially young authors, who are capable of serious research or of hard thinking, and to be a means of bringing their writings into circulation.

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The Rationalist Press Association, Ltd., is "a Company Limited by Guarantee, and not having a Capital divided into shares." It is a propagandist, not a commercial, undertaking. Each member becomes liable for a sum *not exceeding one pound*, in the case of the Association being wound up; but even should the necessity for winding up occur (a highly improbable contingency), it is not likely that the members would be called upon for the amount of their guarantee, as the Directors intend to refrain from embarking on any undertaking for which pecuniary provision has not been made.

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