

**THE MEANING OF  
RATIONALISM:  
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

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The Meaning of Rationalism: And Other Essays by Charles Watts

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**CHARLES WATTS**

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MEANING OF RATIONALISM

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BY  
CHARLES WATTS

Author of "The Miracles of Christian Belief," "The Teachings of  
Secularism," etc.

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TO

GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE,

*my "Guide, Philosopher, and Friend,"*

whose suggestive work on Rationalism many years ago aided in emancipating my mind from the depressing influence of early orthodox teachings.

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## PREFACE

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THE past few decades have been remarkable, not only for general progress, but also for the rapid advancement of Rationalist principles, and consequently for the decline of the belief in orthodox teachings. Thoughtful persons recognise the force of Abercrombie's remark, that "it is the part of a well-regulated mind, not only to know the truths, but to know the grounds on which they are believed to be true." Not long since the habit was to test truth by Christianity; now Christianity is tested by truth. Formerly, reason was made subordinate to faith; now faith has to yield to reason. At a period not very remote the usual custom was to rely with implicit obedience upon pulpit utterances; now, however, the number of those who fairly examine for themselves is undoubtedly increasing. Free and earnest inquiry is more extensive at the present time than it has ever been. The truth of Archbishop Whateley's statement is frankly acknowledged, that "the more confident you are on *just* grounds of being in the right, the more fearlessly ready should you be to hear all that can be urged on the other side."

One of the many mistakes of theologians is that they recognise no active progressive principles, but urge that the true faith was stereotyped about eighteen hundred years ago, and that all subsequent actions and duties must be shaped in its mould. Thus Rationalism has an important work to perform in seeking to destroy old notions which have proved detrimental to healthy mental growth, and in selecting new paths in the field of human thought.

In the following pages, therefore, I have endeavoured to briefly explain the philosophy of Rationalism and its relation to human conduct. The attitude of Agnosticism towards popular Theism, and the superiority of the theory of Evolution to that of Special Creation, are also indicated. The nature of Unbelief is considered, and the relative value of the belief in Nature and in the alleged Supernatural is pointed out. In the revision of the Essay upon Evolution, written some years ago, it has not been deemed necessary to interfere with its essential features, as they are not materially affected by the more recent expositions of the theory. The belief in immortality is likewise dealt with from a Rationalist standpoint. The direction that man's aspirations have taken upon this question is not surprising, for they are largely the outcome of that selfishness which is so distinguishing a characteristic of perverted human nature, which cares for no benefits but personal ones. Let us hope, however, that the time is not far distant when men will see that their conception of immortality had its origin in an erroneous interpretation of a natural sentiment, allied with a desire for personal gratification. How truly did Pope speak when he said that "Hell was built on spite, and heaven on pride."

C. W.

*May, 1905.*



## THE MEANING OF RATIONALISM

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THE Rationalist Press Association, in its Prospectus, defines Rationalism "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." Mr. George Jacob Holyoake has also well observed: "Rationalism advises what is useful to society without asking whether it is religious or not. It makes morality the sole business of life, and declares that, from the cradle to the grave, man should be guided by reason and regulated by science. It looks on man, for all practical purposes, as a purely material being—other systems have chiefly spiritualised him. It would have been well if they had spiritualised his miseries; but they have only refined into nothings his happiness, and left his wrongs and wretchedness solid, material, and enduring. Rationalism does not regard man through the distorting spectacles of theology, which reveals only wounds, bruises, and putrefying sores, but discovers in humanity the germs of indefinite moral progression, which the genial influences of truth, love, and justice will develop and nourish for ever."

This rational philosophy is based upon reason,