

**A CANDID
EXAMINATION
OF THEISM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649238200

A candid examination of theism by George John Romanes

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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FOURTH EDITION

LONDON
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRÜBNER & CO. LTD
BROADWAY HOUSE, CARTER LANE, E.C.
1913

CANST THOU BY SEARCHING FIND OUT GOD?

P R E F A C E.



THE following essay was written several years ago; but I have hitherto refrained from publishing it, lest, after having done so, I should find that more mature thought had modified the conclusions which the essay sets forth. Judging, however, that it is now more than ever improbable that I shall myself be able to detect any errors in my reasoning, I feel that it is time to present the latter to the contemplation of other minds; and in doing so, I make this explanation only because I feel it desirable to state at the outset that the present treatise was written before the publication of Mr. Mill's treatise on the same subject. It is desirable to make this statement, first, because in several instances the trains of reasoning in the two essays are parallel, and next, because in other instances I have quoted passages from Mr. Mill's essay in connections which would be scarcely intelligible were it not understood that these passages are insertions made after the present essay had been completed. I have also added several supplementary essays which have been written since the main essay was finished.

It is desirable further to observe, that the only reason why I publish this edition anonymously is because I feel very strongly that, in matters of the kind with which the present essay deals, opinions and arguments should be

allowed to produce the exact degree of influence to which as opinions and arguments they are entitled: they should be permitted to stand upon their own intrinsic merits alone, and quite beyond the shadow of that unfair pre-judication which cannot but arise so soon as their author's authority, or absence of authority, becomes known. Notwithstanding this avowal, however, I fear that many who glance over the following pages will read in the "Physicus" of the first one a very different motive. There is at the present time a wonderfully wide-spread sentiment pervading all classes of society—a sentiment which it would not be easy to define, but the practical outcome of which is, that to discuss the question of which this essay treats is, in some way or other, morally wrong. Many, therefore, who share this sentiment will doubtless attribute my reticence to a puerile fear on my part to meet it. I can only say that such is not the case. Although I allude to this sentiment with all respect—believing as I do that it is an offshoot from the stock which contains all that is best and greatest in human nature—nevertheless it seems to me impossible to deny that the sentiment in question is as unreasonable as the frame of mind which harbours it must be un-reasoning. If there is no God, where can be the harm in our examining the spurious evidence of his existence? If there is a God, surely our first duty towards him must be to exert to our utmost, in our attempts to find him, the most noble faculty with which he has endowed us—as carefully to investigate the evidence which he has seen fit to furnish of his own existence as we investigate the evidence of inferior things in his dependent creation. To say that there is one rule or method for ascertaining truth in the latter case, which it is not legitimate to apply

in the former case, is merely a covert way of saying that the Deity, if he exists, has not supplied us with rational evidence of his existence. For my own part, I feel that such an assertion cannot but embody far more unworthy conceptions of a Personal God than are represented by any amount of earnest inquiry into whatever evidence of his existence there may be present; but, neglecting this reflection, if there is a God, it is certain that reason is the faculty by which he has enabled man to discover truth, and it is no less certain that the scientific methods have proved themselves by far the most trustworthy for reason to adopt. To my mind, therefore, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that, looking to this undoubted pre-eminence of the scientific methods as ways to truth, whether or not there is a God, the question as to his existence is both more morally and more reverently contemplated if we regard it purely as a problem for methodical analysis to solve, than if we regard it in any other light. Or, stating the case in other words, I believe that in whatever degree we intentionally abstain from using in this case what we *know* to be the most trustworthy methods of inquiry in other cases, in that degree are we either unworthily closing our eyes to a dreaded truth, or we are guilty of the worst among human sins—"Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." If it is said that, supposing man to be in a state of probation, faith, and not reason, must be the instrument of his trial, I am ready to admit the validity of the remark; but I must also ask it to be remembered, that unless faith has *some* basis of reason whereon to rest, it differs in nothing from superstition; and hence that it is still our duty to investigate the *rational* standing of the question before us by the *scientific* methods alone. And I may here observe

parenthetically, that the same reasoning applies to all investigations concerning the reality of a supposed revelation. With such investigations, however, the present essay has nothing to do, although I may remark that if there is any evidence of a Divine Mind discernible in the structure of a professing revelation, such evidence, in whatever degree present, would be of the best possible kind for substantiating the hypothesis of Theism.

Such being, then, what I conceive the only reasonable, as well as the most truly moral, way of regarding the question to be discussed in the following pages, even if the conclusions yielded by this discussion were more negative than they are, I should deem it culpable cowardice in me *for this reason* to publish anonymously. For even if an inquiry of the present kind could ever result in a final demonstration of Atheism, there might be much for its author to regret, but nothing for him to be ashamed of; and, by parity of reasoning, in whatever degree the result of such an inquiry is seen to have a tendency to negative the theistic theory, the author should not be ashamed candidly to acknowledge his conviction as to the degree of such tendency, provided only that his conviction is an *honest* one, and that he is conscious of its having been reached by using his faculties with the utmost care of which he is capable.

If it is retorted that the question to be dealt with is of so ultimate a character that even the scientific methods are here untrustworthy, I reply that they are nevertheless the *best* methods available, and hence that the retort is without pertinence: the question is still to be regarded as a scientific one, although we may perceive that neither an affirmative nor a negative answer can be given to it with any approach to a full demonstration. But if the question