

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Rousseau's God: Theology, Religion, and the Natural Goodness of Man

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3x74x84d>

Journal

JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY, 64(2)

ISSN

0022-5053

Author

Litwin, Christophe F

Publication Date

2026-04-01

DOI

10.1353/hph.2026.a986615

Peer reviewed

surprisingly close to Malebranche and Hobbes—two philosophers who might be considered irreconcilable—and departing from Hume. The third chapter then turns to a central problem of determinism, that of the laws of nature. It shows that Diderot and d'Holbach, despite some differences, both agree that the laws of nature must be understood following a bottom-up model, namely, that the laws of nature are the effect of the relationships between the components of the material universe.

With these three chapters having laid the foundations for the determinism that characterize Diderot and d'Holbach, the second part of the book sets out to show the consequences. Chapter 4 shows that both authors accommodate their determinism to a certain idea of moral responsibility as emanating from the right of societies to sanction actions according to their usefulness or harmfulness. Chapter 5 expands on the very issue of societies and politics, showing how Diderot's and d'Holbach's determinism can explain the historical changes affecting societies. Finally, chapter 6, entitled "Paradoxes of Determinism," shows that the fact that Diderot and d'Holbach recognize nature as a complex system never leads them to infer that it is not entirely determined, and that the unpredictability of the future does not allow us to exempt nature from this principle. *Jacques le fataliste* is thus presented as the novel that brings this aspect of Diderot's thought to life, in the form of a philosophical-literary game whose depth we would be wrong to overlook.

MITIA RIOUX-BEAULNE

University of Ottawa

John T. Scott. *Rousseau's God: Theology, Religion, and the Natural Goodness of Man*. University of Chicago Press, 2023. Pp. 272. Hardback, \$99.00; paperback, \$32.50.

In *Rousseau's God*, John Scott offers a bold, dense, nuanced, diachronic overview of the role of God in Rousseau's philosophical, political, and religious writings. The chapters of the book follow the chronological order of Rousseau's publications from his second *Discourse* (1755) to *Emile* and *The Social Contract* (1762). One notable exception is the first chapter, which expands both before and after the said publication period.

The question of Rousseau's God can be approached from various angles that are not easily reconcilable. While Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of man is often interpreted in light of the concept of theodicy as a theoretical or practical response to the problem of evil, Scott argues that God plays little metaphysical role in it. He favors characterizing it as a "physiodicy" (chapter 2). Rousseau is certainly known for his defense of "optimist" thinkers such as Pope and Leibniz against Voltaire, but he clearly affirmed that he sided with them not because of the truth or convincing power of their metaphysical arguments, but only because he found their doctrines more consolatory, more useful to man, and therefore more persuasive than Voltaire's pessimism (chapter 3). If God is not an underlying metaphysical concept of Rousseau's naturalist "theory of man," then the object of philosophical enquiry for Rousseau is not God as such but religion as an anthropological phenomenon that can be examined from the angle of natural history or from the pragmatic perspective of its moral, social, and/or political utility (chapter 8).

Rousseau, however, develops theological considerations and famously reflects on natural religion in the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*, an autonomous piece enshrined within book IV of *Emile*. Since Rousseau claimed to have given the clearest and most developed, if not systematic, presentation of his principle of the natural goodness of man in *Emile*, the insertion of the *Profession* in this treatise of education raises the question of how the theological considerations and natural religion of the vicar relate to Rousseau's philosophy of the natural goodness of man. Most commentators see in the vicar a spokesman for Rousseau himself. Thus, they attribute to Rousseau the propositions of his fictional character. Scott cautions against this, emphasizing Rousseau's insistence in his *Letter to Beaumont* that he was not the author of the *Profession*, but only its "editor" (133).

Scott suggests that, while inserted in *Emile*, the vicar's teaching on natural religion is not integral to the education of man according to nature (130), and that *Emile* is not at any point the audience of this teaching (147–48). The claim remains, however, aporetic, for in that case, why would Rousseau have chosen to insert the *Profession* at its specific place in *Emile* rather than publish it separately, under another author's name?

Secondly, Scott points out that many of the vicar's key moral, anthropological, and metaphysical propositions, or "articles of faith," are at odds with Rousseau's "theory of man." While the vicar views moral conscience as innate, Rousseau provides in *Emile* a psychological account of its empirical genesis (180–81). While the vicar regards man as by nature sociable, Rousseau considers man by nature as an asocial being (180). While the vicar supports metaphysical dualism, Rousseau is cautious and nuanced on this point.

In Scott's view, these tensions need to be interpreted in light of Rousseau's early considerations on the potentially harmful impact of philosophy on social morality (see chapter 1): the philosophical quest for truth, in debunking, dispelling, or at the very least destabilizing core popular religious beliefs, can be, when publicized, socially and politically more harmful than useful. Depending on the context, the social utility of religion is not necessarily congruent with its truth. Thus, according to Scott, the vicar's religious sentiment and theological views should not be considered in light of their philosophical truth, nor even in light of their utility in the education of a man according to nature (chapter 4), but only in light of their moral, social, and (perhaps) political utility for a target audience (i.e. the European societies of Rousseau's time) whose religious beliefs are already destabilized by enlightenment philosophy. As a result, it is not clear whether, for Scott, there is such a thing as a Rousseauian natural religion or whether the vicar's natural religion is nothing more than a useful fable (231), which Rousseau would regard as valuable with respect less to its philosophical truth than to its moral and political utility to a target audience. Here, Scott's interpretation of the *Profession*, and of Rousseau's relationship to truth, may owe more than he would like to admit (14) to Straussian hermeneutics. Rousseau, however, did claim that conformity with natural religion was a criterion to embrace some religious teachings (such as that of the Gospels) as *true* (192–93), and not simply as useful. Moreover, while he argued that the philosophical questioning of prejudices in the name of truth could be socially harmful, he also claimed that once prejudices were destabilized, the good that *truth* can do for men must not be sacrificed to the preservation of these prejudices. Scott claims, unconvincingly in my view, that Rousseau was not as assertive on this point as he sounds (46–47), and not such a friend of truth after all.

CHRISTOPHE F. LITWIN

University of California, Irvine

Lorne Falkenstein. *Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism in Hume's Thought*. Routledge, 2024.

Pp. 338. Hardback, \$152.00; paperback, \$45.59.

Lorne Falkenstein's book is a challenging study of some of the most perplexing, yet underdiscussed problems in Hume's epistemology and metaphysics. The general focus of *Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism* (CTS) is the reconciliation of Hume's skeptical empiricism with his naturalism. Falkenstein views the problem and its resolution from multiple new angles with the critical insight only a seasoned scholar of Hume and the eighteenth century could possess. Specifically, CTS deals with what Falkenstein calls a "practical" problem about belief for Hume: Hume recommends that we proportion our beliefs to the evidence, but the evidence is always experiential, which Hume shows to be unreliable (1, 3). This problem is manifested in the question of "objectivity" on which the book centers: how can we justifiably move from our changing perceptions to belief in external and enduring objects (6–8, 251–77)? Falkenstein thinks Hume has the resources to show how we can.