If anyone has won the laurel as the contemporary feminist’s friend from the past it has been David Hume. Feminists have taken a lively interest in Hume for a variety of reasons. Hume’s naming of sentiment as the basis for ethics has been used to support contemporary feminist ethics of care. He has been praised for a non-essentialist social view of personhood that allows women and natives to be included (Sarah Merrill, “A Feminist Use of Hume’s Moral Ontology” in Bar On (ed.), *Modern Engendering*). Hume has been applauded for coming up with a woman-friendly way to think about truth (Genevieve Lloyd in “Hume and the Passion for Truth” in Jacobson (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*). Even Hume’s biases as they surface in aesthetic or moral theory have been recommended as a useful “caution,” a way to separate out what is false or true in feminist ethical theory (Marcia Lind, “Indians, Savages, Peasants, and Women” in Bar On (ed.), *Modern Engendering*). But the most sustained and thoroughgoing presentation and defense of Hume as feminist’s friend comes from Annette Baier. In articles and books over a period of decades Baier worked with Hume, weaving her views and his together in a unique style of historical collaboration.

Hume, the radical skeptic, is a staple in the teaching of modern philosophy. His arguments on the failure of reason in the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature* are legendary and pivotal in the dramatic plotting of the history of modern philosophy. Like Descartes’s dreaming argument, Hume’s exposure of the fallacy in basing belief on reason is a standard test for the fledging philosopher, challenging her or him to take a step beyond common sense to appreciate the force of Hume’s counter-intuitive skepticism. At a more advanced level, students try to devise answers to that skepticism that preserve knowledge and defend truth.

Baier’s Hume was different. Charging that many of her colleagues had read
selectively, Baier insisted that Book I of Hume’s T

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, the book from which readings are usually taken, must be read with the remaining Books II and III on the passions and on morals. Book I, in which Hume argues that the only basis for belief is custom and sentiment, she said, should be understood in the context of the more constructive approach to philosophy in the later books. In turn, the entire \textit{Treatise} should be read with Hume’s later essays and histories, materials that philosophers often ignore as of little philosophical interest. The extreme skepticism with which Book I of the \textit{Treatise} ends, argued Baier, is only a temporary resting place. From there Hume goes on to initiate a new “carefree” style of philosophizing and a new non-dogmatic naturalized approach to knowledge. Furthermore, Baier argued convincingly, feminists can learn from Hume’s approach to knowledge. The answer to the question posed in the title of Baier’s best-known essay on the subject, “Hume: The Reflective Woman’s Epistemologist?” is “Yes. He is.”

In the introduction to a major book on Hume, \textit{A Progress of Sentiments}, Baier addressed a question on many feminists’ minds. Given that the history of philosophy, and the history of modern philosophy in particular, is riddled with misogyny and includes very little writing by women and no writing by any man who is not a white man of European descent, is it a lost cause to attempt to intervene in that history? After proper critiques are made as to the sexism, racism, classism of philosophy, is the logical next step to forget about philosophy as we know it and attempt to reconstruct feminist thought from “reflective women’s” own experience. This, some feminists argued, was the only way in which feminist philosophy could escape contamination from concepts based on the nature of man or men’s position in modern society. It was an argument that Baier rejected. There are many themes, she argued, in current feminist epistemology that can be found in Hume. Why not “get helpful support from a well-meaning fellow worker, dead or alive, woman or man?” (“Hume: the Reflective Woman’s Epistemologist” in \textit{Postures}, p. 20). It is “self-defeating,” said Baier, to dismiss all male philosophers without examining each text to see if there might be something of value. Examining Hume, she found much of value.

Baier went on to make an even more controversial claim. Hume, she said, might be taken to be, if not feminine, in a “feminine position.” As a “backward” Scot, as someone trying to break into a prejudiced academic establishment without success, Hume is a “suitable mascot for feminist philosophers” (\textit{Postures}, p. 20). Hume was, she said, whether he knew it or not, a “virtual woman” (p. 22), which accounted for his popularity with
women and his obvious liking for their company. An “outsider” status shared with women allowed him to conceive “radical goals for the transformation of philosophy” (p. 22). His attack on the sovereignty of reason was, in effect, an attack on the whole “patriarchal tradition” with its assertion of manly reason over feminine passion, appetite, and good sense.

Baier explained how she had come to this conclusion. Educated in Oxford in the 1950s in the heart of the English-speaking philosophical establishment, she was steeped in the standard philosophical wisdom that reason has authority over the common man’s feelings, customs, traditions, and habits. The philosopher analyzed, defined, and constructed arguments. Philosophers, both past and present, formulated general laws, which could be applied in morals as well as in natural science. Her first doubts came reading Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* with the Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Wittgenstein’s meandering but incisive questioning, she realized, undermined the whole program of philosophy as contemporary philosophers understood it. If there are no natural kinds, no inner objects or thoughts, no rigid definitions, no general rules independent of variable “forms of life,” what becomes of philosophy? What is the job of a philosopher if it is not, as Wittgenstein seemed to suggest, to give up philosophizing altogether? British and American philosophers responded in various ways to the challenge. Wittgenstein could be downgraded as a crank and ignored, and a program of logical analysis renewed. Some like John Austin, also at Oxford, invented new forms of linguistic analysis based on the “ordinary” use of words that circumvented Wittgensteinian critiques. Baier turned to Hume. For her Hume provided a model for a post-Wittgenstein philosophizing that is not a rigidly ordered academic specialty with dubious roots, but a human endeavor that gives importance to sentimental and social sources of knowledge. She and Hume, it seemed to her, had a common aim: finding a way to think reflectively about human life without relying on dubious faith in the sovereignty of reason.

To discredit Hume and all other male philosophers, Baier suggested, is an epistemological mistake and based on a false view of the mind. The mind is seen as a reflecting mirror, a mirror whose own imperfections may distort reality, but that nevertheless can be polished or adjusted so as to give a relatively clear view of the objects it reflects. If this false view of the mind motivates feminist attempts to go it alone, to think about reality from a woman’s own independent reflecting mind, such attempts are bound to fail. Thinking is not a result of any pristine seeing but comes in trains of
thoughts always shared with others. Although in theory Hume postulates “simple impressions” he also makes clear they do not figure in human thinking in that state. Thought is never purely private and introspective, but is embedded in tools, material culture, geography, and history. This accounts for Hume’s turn from academic analysis to essays on human issues. Feminists who reject the history of thought, who propose going it alone, make a mistake about the mind’s autonomy. It is impossible to go it alone, to think free of tradition, said Baier; what is important is to use tradition critically, to pick and choose among the past what best suits feminist sentiments and intuitions. In such a process, said Baier, Hume, whatever his masculine shortcomings, is an ally.

Unlike philosophers who hold an illusory view of the mind as understandable in terms of discrete mental objects such as propositions and representations, Hume, said Baier, was acutely aware how meaning is governed by custom in the form of a public language that mediates experience and ideas. Meaning in language is governed socially and never autonomously, an insight that was also at the heart of the later “linguistic turn” initiated by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s arguments against the possibility of a “private language” in which words refer to ideas were aimed at Locke and Descartes with their assumption of mental independence. If meanings are determined socially, there can be “no pretense of building up a public world from subjective pre-social certainties of the sort Descartes seemed to be searching for” (Progress of Sentiments, p. 33). In other words, there is no starting afresh from clear and distinct feminist impressions and ideas, and then constructing a feminist theory free of masculine bias.

Again Baier asked the question that comes up over and over in the upheaval of social and intellectual systems taking place in the modern period: What is man? What is man’s proper function and role? What is human understanding? For Descartes the mind is a thing apart, a separate substance set off from the physical world, pre-imprinted with ideas that reflect reality and that are the basis for knowledge. With Locke that imprinting fails. The mind is a thing apart from material life, but it is equipped only with limited ideas from a particular man’s or woman’s experiences. The link between the spiritual substance or space of the mind and physical bodies weakens. No sure inference can now be made that external things exist as they are conceived by the mind. All people can do is put their ideas in order and hope that something like those ideas probably caused them.
In the concluding sections of Book I of Hume’s *Treatise* the basis of even that probable assumption is undermined. Reason utterly fails to prove that there are causes operating in the world, that the future will be like the past, that substances outside the mind exist, or that primary qualities exist in objects anymore than secondary qualities. Reason utterly fails to prove that God or the soul exists, or that anything of the mind exists except an ephemeral stream of consciousness. We continue to believe these things because we cannot help ourselves. We cannot know that they are true. Even mathematics and logic, which seem to depend on pure reason, are uncertain, as the mind must successively doubt whether it has correctly applied formal rules, and with each new doubt compound the probability of having made a mistake. Even here reason leads, when pursued, to “a total extinction of belief and evidence” and a total suspension of judgment (*Treatise*, I, IV, Section 1, p. 183). Our salvation, according to Hume, is weariness. Eventually we lose the impulse to continue a questioning so “tortured” and “unnatural,” and return to ordinary belief. Regardless of the pretensions of logicians and philosophers, belief is a product of sentiment and custom. We believe what is our and others’ habit to believe. We believe in ideas to which imagination and sentiment give liveliness and vibrancy.

Hume made clear that the greater part of human thinking was “animal intelligence,” instinctive, emotional, habit-bound. What makes human thought unique is not the autonomy of a mind standing apart from material or social life with untouched ideas, or even with ideas borrowed from others. It is the more humble human capacity to respond to what others say. Baier titled a series of her lectures, *The Commons of the Mind*. Thinking for Hume and for many feminists, she argued, is not a private activity occasionally shared with others, but a conversation with others, which, for short periods of time, can go on in one’s own mind. Instead of private minds locked in personal soliloquy, mind is something we have in common with others.

This Hume recognized and practiced, said Baier. In strategic despair at the end of Book I of the *Treatise*, certain that philosophers and metaphysicians will condemn him, Hume redirects his thinking in Books II and III to a different audience. Said Baier, others should follow his example. It was not so much the failure of Promethean knowledge claims that drove Hume to despair at the end of Book I. Rather it was the understanding that he would be unable to communicate his radical ideas to an academic establishment not interested in change. Ideas are nothing, said Baier along with Hume, unless
one can communicate them, unless one can hear and digest others’ comments and criticisms. “Response,” not logical acuity, is the key to successful philosophy and successful knowledge. For Hume, failure to gain an audience was not only a blow to vanity; it was a blow to truth. “The moral of the story, as I am telling it,” said Baier along with Hume, is that “all our interpretations will ‘loosen and fall of themselves’ until they become cooperative and mutually corrective” (Progress of Sentiments, p. ix). She called on coworkers and colleagues, feminists and non-feminists, to take up with her the work of reworking naturalized epistemology in a Humean mode.

The mind according to Baier’s Hume is an embodied living mind, not radically different in kind from the mind of any other animal. The shift in emphasis from Locke to Hume has been noted by many commentators. In Locke the mind actively sorts, stores, abstracts from its ideas. Hume describes what goes on in the mind naturally and inevitably. The question of where ideas in the mind come from recedes as an issue. They are there. There is no more imprinting by God, or any argument to show that external objects must cause sensations. The undecidable question of whether ideas are caused by external objects, the mind itself, or by God, says Hume, is not “material to our present purpose.” We draw “inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusion of the senses” (Treatise, I, II, Section v, p. 84).

The difference for Hume between ideas that we believe and ideas we do not, or between memory images and imagined images, is internal, in the “vivacity” or “force” with which we conceive ideas. Moving by cause and effect reasoning beyond present impressions and ideas to external objects or historical events is equally due to a natural process, useful for self-preservation and the avoidance of pain. Custom and imagination transfer vivacity from a present impression to ideas when similar ideas and impressions have been in constant conjunction in the past. Given these processes, most of people’s beliefs are due to education, which by simple repetition gives vivacity and habit to any idea. All probable reasoning—for Hume virtually all reasoning is probable—is a “species of sensation” (Treatise, I, III, Section viii, p. 103). Hume, said Baier, points to passion and morals to drive his point home. To base reasoning on custom and habit may seem strange, until you understand the close connection between belief and emotion and will. If it were only present sensations that arouse emotion and activate the will, we could not foresee danger. If all our ideas excited passion, we would be driven mad. The mental processes of belief formation and cause and effect reasoning are
devised by “nature” as a middle ground, so that relatively clear dangers can be avoided and remote possibilities and idle fantasies ignored.

Even in this protective function Humean reason is ineffective by itself. Belief without emotion of any kind has no effect on the will. It is only because we care about the outcome that we act. Here was the overturning of emphasis that Baier found so compelling. It is not Hume, the Sophist, who is her collaborator, but Hume who left in ruins a tripartite model of the soul that dates back to Plato. The ideal of a controlling reason, ruling over spirit and emotion, credited with much of the superiority of “Western” man, is demolished. “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Treatise, II, III, Section ii, p. 415). The moral at the end of Book I of the Treatise, said Baier, is not that there is no truth, but that reason cut off from emotion, from civility, and from the normal impulses of sympathy and self-interest, must destroy itself. Reason is nothing without the direction of passion. Reason cut off from concern and debate is monstrous, but Hume’s final conclusion is not skeptical. It is reconstructive. Reading on to Books II and III, says Baier, it becomes clear that the moral of the Treatise is not that reason should be abandoned but that it should be “enlarged” to include response to others, caring judgment, and shared moral sentiment, the very elements promoted in feminist philosophy.

Baier did not coolly and analytically dissect and critique arguments. Traditionally adversarial, philosophers have for the most part read past philosophers as either right or wrong. A properly philosophical reading isolates positions and analyzes arguments as valid or invalid. Alternatively, competitive interpretation can take center stage, and a scholar can make a name for herself by proposing and defending novel or contentious interpretations of texts. Baier’s meditation on Hume in Progress of Sentiments proceeded on different principles. The point was neither to criticize nor to come up with what Hume “really” meant or said. Places where Hume is not clear or consistent were taken for granted as part of Hume’s thinking. The point was not to prove Hume right or wrong, but to attempt to think along with him through the crucial bottlenecks where thoughts become tangled and inconsistent. On this approach, a work of philosophy like the Treatise is not a series of timeless logical or illogical steps, but a train of thought in narrative sequence that Baier as contemporary philosopher retraces and extends. Instead of stopping at the astonishing proposition that the idea of enduring substances or minds is a fiction, Baier followed Hume on to the next idea, in which these fictions are
ways, perhaps even necessary ways, to organize experience. In the famous skeptical conclusion to Book I, Hume is in despair, lost at sea; he can find no foothold for belief. Are we to take his despair seriously? Are we to hear a mocking parody of Descartes’s despair in the *Meditations*? Baier listens attentively to separate out irony from assertion. She waits to hear what aspects of Hume’s skepticism will be abandoned as he moves on into the more constructive Books II and III.

Baier’s sympathetic and participatory reading of Hume required not just analysis of assertion and argument, but an ear for style and tone. It required not just logical acumen, but a feeling for Hume the man. She did not claim for such a reading that it is the only correct reading. Others may hear what Hume says differently, just as in conversation what is said can be understood differently by different participants. The model, Baier said, was Hume’s own. Philosophy in Hume’s enlarged sense is a cooperative endeavor, not conducted in solitude or barricaded with argument against response, but open to communication and response.

But is it safe to follow along so trustingly the thought of another philosopher, to put so much into understanding and so little into suspicion? What kind of knowledge is this social and sentimental knowledge that is to give added support to a reconstructed feminist epistemology? Does it doom feminist proposals to relative truth? Does it mean that feminists have no decisive weapons with which to defeat claims that women are inferior? Does it remove women from participating fully in philosophy as it is currently practiced in prestigious academic institutions? Will it disqualify feminist essays for publication in leading philosophy journals? Will it, just as Hume feared for himself, expose feminists to “the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians” (*Treatise*, I, IV, Section vii, p. 264)? What kind of mind is claimed by Hume and Baier as the human mind? A feminine mind? An inferior mind? Without authority? Doomed to passive reaction? To following along with custom? Following socialized instincts? Could not this be seen as reversion to feminine stereotypes and feminine powerlessness? Even more important, what has happened to critical reflection, which seems to require an adversarial stance against others as well as against one’s own vested ideas?

Baier’s Hume is no nihilist. He does not reject all critical reflection and reason. After the skeptical arguments, Baier argued, he reconstructed a more “careless” or “carefree” reasonableness, a reasonableness that is protective against error and that allows non-dogmatic assertions of truth. First, Hume
recognized a natural animal instinct of good sense. Although in non-human forms good sense operates in a narrow prescribed sphere, the sheer number of ideas that humans generate in their hyperactive imagination and memory adds a further dimension. Given the fecundity of their ideas, said Hume, humans are pressed to choose, pressed to highlight ideas with the most force and vivacity, and pressed to suppress others as less important. Still there is nothing in this extension of animal "good sense" to mental housekeeping that has normative force. From the standpoint of critical reflection, the most forceful and vivid of our ideas could turn out to be wrong. Certainly ideas of women expressed by Hume and other modern philosophers were nothing if not vivid.

But Baier and other defenders of Hume were able to point to passages in which Hume seems to allow for further correction of error. For example in Book III of the Treatise Hume admits that adjustment of sentiment-based judgments is necessary. Hume’s ethics are based on natural sympathy, a sympathy felt most acutely for those nearest to us, and most acutely of all for ourselves. Sympathy for others, especially if they are not family and friends, will almost always, says Hume, be overruled by strong self-interest. But, said Hume, it is also “natural” for people to correct their partial moral judgments, by “calm determinations of the passions founded on some distant view or reflection” (Treatise, III, III, Section i, pp. 582–3). The reason Hume gives is pragmatic. If a man judges solely on the basis of his own interests, difficulties arise. First, given that his interests will inevitably conflict with other men’s interests, he will find himself constantly contradicted in conversation. Secondly, he will not be able to maintain consistency of judgment as his own interests change. One year with a high income he will be against taxes; the next year being unemployed he will want more progressive rates. Given the discomfort of both controversy and inconsistency, says Hume, a man is forced to seek some more general, more philosophic, standard of judgment based on a wider sympathy with others. Such a sentiment does not come near to being as lively as self-interest, or interest in family and friends. It does not arouse strong passions of love and hate and can easily be overcome by those passions. But given its greater steadiness and its calming effect, it is at least sometimes able to subdue the more heated emotions (Treatise, III, III, Section i, pp. 582–4).

Even here feminists might have qualms. Will such a reflective reason be of use in correcting racist or misogynous misconceptions? An Englishman, with interests abroad, may naturally have trouble being sympathetic with
Indians, Africans, or Muslims who seem to interfere with profitable trade. Closer to home, a man with everything to gain from a wife who devotes herself to his needs may have trouble being sympathetic with a woman’s unhappiness in her restricted life. But it is hard to see how such partiality is likely to be corrected in the process described by Hume. At his club, and at fashionable dinners, such a man consorts with men whose interests coincide with his own. Certainly he is unlikely to find himself in conversation with Indians, Muslims, or Africans. He speaks with his wife, but she is a lone voice and his self-interest in domestic matters is so well settled and institutionally established that it is hard to see why he should suffer the variability in interest that would cause him the embarrassment of inconsistency. Small disagreements among communities of broadly common interest can be adjusted in this way, but not the overturning of institutionalized prejudice shared by men who socialize with their own class and gender. Baier comments on Hume’s insistence in his *History of England* and essays on government on the importance of established venues for political discussion, but there is no reason to think that women, foreigners, or working-class English men would have any standing in those venues.

Should not a feminist expect more from philosophy? Baier found in Hume a powerful ally against philosophic presumption, and a corrective to certain kinds of feminist extremism. An “unreflective” feminist might reject reason out of hand as identified with masculine privilege, a position hard to maintain without absurdity. She might learn from Hume, as Baier suggests, a more subtle approach. The problem with the philosopher’s solitary intellectualist reason is not only that philosophic reason has been in complicity with conservative politics; Hume’s more deflating observation is reason’s and academic philosophy’s powerlessness. Speculative reason cannot, in fact, command belief. No matter how many clever arguments establish that the external world is an illusion or that the future might not be like the past, we continue to believe by habit and instinct. Reason without the imagination and sentiment that establishes belief is a dead letter. It does not command belief; it does not provide a motive for any kind of action. It is moribund, an academic specialty with no impact on beliefs or actions.

Why, asks Hume at the end of Book II, do philosophers philosophize? What is the sentiment that drives them when there is no apparent utility in philosophy for themselves or others? Is it simply love of the game of reasoning, pleasure in finding a solution to a puzzle-problem? But even in hunting or gaming, there has to be a quarry, a goal with at least pretended importance.
Philosophers do regularly include a paragraph or two at the beginning or end of their treatises explaining the importance of what they are about to prove or have already proven. But do philosophers care about that goal any more than a hunter cares about the few partridges that he shoots? Philosophers, said Hume, can take a kind of distant abstract interest in the academic possibility of a result, just as a military expert surveying the fortifications of a foreign enemy city might idly estimate the fortifications’ efficiency without any real interest in the defense of that city, but it is hard to think that this is what drives philosophers to page after page of the dense reasoning typical in philosophical writing.

Hume was candid about the reasons for his own return to philosophy after the skeptical doubts of Book I. In so far as philosophy takes as its goal the factual understanding of human nature, he was curious. How do the mechanisms of the mind work? What is the cause of various passions? How are governments structured? There is pleasure in finding some principle behind phenomena so as to guard against surprise and false expectations. And, perhaps even more important, he was ambitious, a motive freely admitted by the disarming Hume. He wanted very much to make a name for himself, which he was successful in doing after he turned away from abstruse reasoning to a more popular style of writing in his Essays. There is, he pointed out, a further benefit of “careless” philosophizing: it keeps the mind occupied and off more dangerous speculation in religion. “Superstition” disturbs people in their life and actions; philosophy, calmer and less agitated, incites no one to action. If a man is able to give up both philosophy and religion and live without too many questions that is best. The practical man, said Hume, should not be disturbed (Treatise, II, III, Section x, pp. 448–54). If a man, a man like himself, however, has an active mind and is not content with a merely practical life, philosophy is preferred to religion as the lesser of evils.

The question, of course, is not whether feminists might be tempted to question the adequacy for feminist purposes of Hume’s calm, distant, harmless philosophic curiosity, but whether in wanting more they are not guilty of the excessive zeal condemned as dangerous by Hume and Baier. Baier herself took no radical feminist stances; she did not call for an end to heterosexuality, demand paychecks for homemakers, or a boycott of mothering. But it is hard to see how even moderate feminist reforms can be strongly defended given Hume’s “careless” “love of truth.”

Following Hume’s lead, a feminist might defend probable reasoning from cause and effect following rules of practice laid down by Hume (Treatise, I,
III, Section xv, p. 173). She might defend a natural process of corrective “reflection,” in which the ruling passion of self-interest is tempered by second thoughts that tell us that “the passion [of greed] is much better satisfied by its restraint, than by its liberty.” She might tell those with radical sentiments “that by preserving society, we make much greater advances in the acquiring of possessions, than by running into the solitary and forlorn condition, which must follow upon violence and universal license” (Treatise, III, II, Section ii, p. 492). She might approve the study of history and different forms of government to help sort out the general usefulness of various institutions. She might praise with Hume practical “intellectual virtues,” virtues that help a man or woman to succeed in the world and make him or her a good partner in business, virtues such as “industry, perseverance, patience, activity, application, constancy” (Treatise, III, III, Section iv, p. 610). She could adopt a style of reasoning that is “carefree,” witty, and open, not barricaded behind absolute truth, claiming only probability. She could acknowledge that beliefs and judgments are based on no necessarily true foundations, and must always be submitted to others for their understanding and confirmation. The question remains: is this enough for feminist purposes? Is it enough to force the changes that feminists demand?

Further readings

Various feminist appropriations and criticisms of Hume can be found in Bat-Ami Bar On’s edited collection, Modern Engendering: Critical Feminist Readings in Modern Western Philosophy, and in Anne Jacobson’s collection, Feminist Interpretations of David Hume. Genevieve Lloyd’s essay “Hume and the Passion for Truth” in the Jacobson collection to some degree endorses Baier’s Humean alternative to rationalism, but also finds other integrative alternatives to rationalism in the early modern period and argues that they are not original with Hume. Annette Baier’s books, all of which deal in one way or another with Humean perspectives, include, in addition to A Progress of Sentiments, The Commons of the Mind in which she extends Humean attitudes to several areas of philosophy, and Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals, a collection of her early essays focusing on Hume’s critique of rationalism and its applications to ethics.