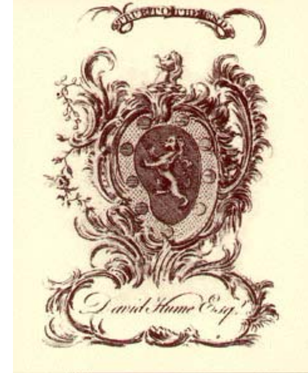

Christopher Williams. ***A Cultivated Reason: An Essay on Hume and Humeanism***
Mary Mothersill
Hume Studies Volume XXV, Number 1 and 2 (April/November, 1999) 256-262.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.
Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

http://www.humesociety.org/hs/

HUME STUDIES
Volume XXV, Numbers 1 and 2, April/November 1999, pp. 256–262

CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS. *A Cultivated Reason: An Essay on Hume and Humeanism*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. viii + 190. ISBN 0-271-01821-6, $17.95, paper.

A Cultivated Reason is an intriguing book. Everyone who thinks she understands Hume or is pretty sure that she doesn't should read it. It is elegantly written, informal and illuminating. It does take patience however, partly because its organization is idiosyncratic and sometimes confusing. (I'm not sure exactly what "linear reasoning" means but am clear enough to be sure that Williams's mode is nonlinear.) Williams combines exegesis of Humean texts—the *Treatise*, the two *Enquiries*, and the *Essays*—with the defense of a view that he calls "nonrationalism."[1] This wide-ranging theory stakes claims in ontology, theory of knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and in the broader issue of how philosophical reflection is related to the concerns of everyday life. Williams endorses nonrationalism and believes that Hume is its progenitor; for almost every nonrationalist thesis, Williams finds a Humean precedent. Here he goes against the tradition in which the *explication des textes* requires the explicator to keep his own theoretical commitments in the background. Williams does not do this and thus he aligns himself with philosophically sophisticated commentators—David Pears, Robert Fogelin, and Barry Stroud are examples—who are explicit and candid about where they stand. As a consequence of Williams's procedure, the reader is often at a loss to know whether a particular thesis is being ascribed to Hume or whether the author is trying in a Humean spirit to advance the nonrationalist cause. There do seem to be significant differences, for example, the nonrationalist does not countenance the gap that was important to Hume between the "is" and the "ought." So if you object or disagree, you don't know where to complain.

There is a further complication: in the bad old days when nobody read the *Treatise*, the textbooks regularly characterized Hume's theory as a reduction of empiricism. (If you start from Locke and follow through, you will end as a skeptic with nothing to say either in epistemology or in ethics.) Then people rediscovered the *Treatise*: what with its grand constructive design and its Newtonian aspirations, it does not sound like the last gasp of empiricism (or of anything else). But read in conjunction with Hume's later works, it did bring to the fore problems about the consistency and coherence of his overall theory. What conception of personal identity can accommodate both the notion of the self as a bundle of passing impressions and the role assigned to the self in Books II and III? If our knowledge extends to nothing beyond our perceptions, how do we account for ordinary scientific procedures? If necessary connections are fictitious, how can we agree that a cause is always necessary? Again, how can Hume, champion of common sense, prophet of the Enlightenment,

assert that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions?" Why doesn't Hume face up to these questions? The most sympathetic critics occasionally voice their exasperation. Not Williams, however: he sees Humean philosophy as unitary, systematic, and entirely credible. For some of the apparent paradoxes he offers a solution; others he simply ignores with the suggestion that they do not arise for nonrationalism.

On Williams's interpretation, Hume's theory has a negative and a positive component. On the one hand it aims to demolish rationalism, and for Williams that means not just Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz but Plato, Kant, Hegel, and all but a few contemporary thinkers. On the positive side we have the nonrationalists, but it is not clear who, besides Williams, belongs to that club. Let me try in what follows to summarize both the claims of rationalism and the grounds on which it is said to be unacceptable.

To be a rationalist is not merely to acknowledge the authority of reason in its proper province. Hume takes that province to include arithmetic, geometry, and algebra, and I suppose that the nonrationalist would want to add logic and (some parts of) philosophy. The rationalist goes further and endows reason with extensive, virtually limitless normative powers. A conscientious rationalist will bow to the authority of reason in every area. Neither the passions nor imagination nor theistic faith can override its demands. It is this claim to hegemony that must be disallowed. In science and in the deliberations of everyday life, reason is not only useless but counterproductive. But don't assume that the alternative is irrationalism, which is palpably absurd. The irrationalist takes seriously what, on Williams view, is a mere rhetorical flourish, namely, that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions. Since the irrationalist has no use for arguments, he cannot be refuted and may be left to stew in his own juice. No, the proper complement to rationalism is nonrationalism, which offers guidance in the areas that rationalism has usurped.

Since rationalism by hypothesis is responsive to argument, we need to examine its claims. The aboriginal thesis is that mental contents derive from the mind itself and have, in virtue of their origin, systematic logical relations. Leibnizean monads are self-contained, self-regulated systems, set up in such a way as to make possible inferences from one of the monad's contents to another. Alexander the Great has a makeup that would permit an ideal observer to trace the whole of Alexander's life from any part. Descartes supposes that we can, with sufficient care, safely advance from the cogito to a belief that a veracious God exists who guarantees the existence of a material world from which we are metaphysically distinct (but to a part of which we are intimately connected) (9). One objection to rationalism is that it precludes the telling of a naturalistic story about minds. Such a story would begin with the assumption that as denizens of the earth, we are continuous with and bear relevant resemblances to other mammals. It would include an account of the ethical and rational assessments that our species engages in. The naturalist does not hold

that science gives an exhaustive or a privileged view; nor does she hold that values are not part of the "fabric" of the universe (11).

To see how unnaturalistic rationalism is, consider Plato. If all knowledge is recollection, if we can't make sense of the idea that knowledge comes from without, then it follows trivially that knowledge is *in* us in some sense. But then we have to figure out what factors are causing trouble, and it is natural to conceive of mind as having fallen away from a more pristine state. But we are skeptical about pristine states, and it is very hard to see how Plato's story can be fitted into a naturalistic evolutionary account of the origins of knowledge (12). A further point: if, as the rationalist maintains, there is nothing to be learned from what we see or hear in our immediate environment, it follows that little significance attaches to the fact that our minds are embodied. There is a question about how our physiological hardware is connected with mental functioning, but note that this is one that the rationalist can neither avoid nor provide with a nonparadoxical answer. We face the prospect of a philosophy for disembodied spirits.

The normativity of rationalism appears in what Williams calls the "rationalist imperative." Cartesian in origin, the imperative not only permits but requires that we affirm the existence of whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived—for Descartes, thinking substance, God, and the material world. But, as everyone admits, we have no agreed-upon criterion for what ideas are clear and distinct, and so have no defense against claims that are arbitrary and dogmatic. As for theology, the Humean nonrationalist holds that while all its descriptive claims are false, still if one feels the need for some religion, then polytheism is less obnoxious than monotheism, favored by rationalists for its abstractness. The Homeric gods are congenial and vivid: they hold our attention.

We listen to the exploits of craggy, irascible old Zeus, and we are entertained; we recognize in him a type of character, and we imagine a life for him. That life is certainly larger than ours, and not just in the sense that Zeus can do a few more physical tricks than we can. If Zeus strikes us as being a limited character (as all characters are), we can shift our attention to Athena or any of the other members of the pantheon.

By the time we reach the Christian era, we notice a certain evisceration. Jesus is a rather epicene shepherd whose seemingly inexhaustible fascination with counting his flock makes him a little mysterious, a little harder for us to grasp as a complete person. By the time the god of the philosophers is fully on board, we do not have an embodied person at all. Instead, we have withering theorems that demonstrate his existence, with many complicated steps and obscure inferential principles, and nobody knows what his (his?) manner of life could be like (or even knows if the language we use to describe persons is appropriate any longer for describing the divine) (115).

The worst feature of the rationalist viewpoint is its false heroism. We obtain through rationalism a self-conception according to which we are able,

potentially, by means of various belief and value purification exercises, to invest our beliefs and values with a magnificent global order or tidiness. The independent intellect is capable of performing and surveying the order. A strong note of heroism is discernible in both the procedures and the results envisaged in the application of the procedures: we have to have a titanically self-reflective single-mindedness of intention in order to carry out the purification exercises and to abide in the purified state (175).

Williams's account of rationalism and its pretensions, although sketched in rather broad strokes, is reasonably clear. What should we think of it? Someone might say that the objections are otiose, that Williams's rationalism is a Don Quixote windmill since no one today regards the rationalism that he describes as more than a historical curiosity. Not so, he argues: we may have jettisoned the ontology and the basic epistemological premise, but the rationalist imperative maintains its sway. We do not believe in innate ideas or in the infallibility of introspection but we do assume that conceptions that are figurative or ill-defined ought to be rejected in favor of those that warrant acceptance just through their transparency. Well, maybe: but which of us today feels bound by the rationalist imperative? Couldn't a case be made out that Hume himself did? Again it is unclear how much is attributed to Hume and how much is imputed to nonrationalism. For example, the claim that rationalism sanctions a view of the person as disembodied intellect is developed in a novel and interesting way, but I don't recall encountering it in Hume. A similar complaint may be made about the charge of false heroism. It does have merits: Williams is the first commentator I know who makes use of Edgar Wind's important paper, "Hume and the Heroic Portrait," which shows how the philosopher, through his friendship with the painter Ramsey, was drawn into the controversy in which Gainsborough, who believed in simple but affecting poses, was pitted against Reynolds, who wanted his subjects to emerge as larger than life, pedigreed, allegorical, sublime.[2]

I wonder whether we don't have to recognize that rationalists differ from one another in respect of heroic pretensions. Spinoza, for example, was not given to grandstanding; Descartes surely was: his discovery in himself of a clear and distinct idea of God is depicted as a dramatic event, comparable, it strikes me, to Robinson Crusoe's suddenly noticing the print of a naked foot very plain upon the sand. But Hume doesn't complain about Descartes and was not himself above striking a pose. Consider the famous passage in the Conclusion of the *Treatise* (T 264): Williams himself describes it as a "histrionic ventilation of a faintly dandified paranoia (which reads like a parody of the persona yet to come in Rousseau's Reveries)" (56).

Since rationalism is said to be an affliction of all empiricists (with the exception of Hume), of Kant and Hegel, and to have survived in the observance of the rationalist imperative today, I ask myself whether I am a rationalist. The only examples of nonrationalists that Williams offers are Nietzsche,

Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida, and I don't feel much affinity with any of them. Let me check: I don't believe in the Forms or in God or in Leibnizeian monads. Most of my ideas are neither clear nor distinct; the ones that are seem unilluminating and pretty obvious, as, for example, my idea that an inconsistent theory cannot be altogether true. Where does Williams stand? I am not sure. In his positive account, which I have hardly touched on, he does endorse what he calls "resemblance inference." That is what leads you to move from the premises (1) that nothing is known to exist except ideas and the impressions from which they are derived and (2) that the impression I now have of my desk and fireplace is a lot like the perception I had five minutes ago when I left my study, to the conclusion (3) that the desk and fireplace continued to exist, unperceived, in my absence. The move from (1) to (3) can be called an inference, if you like, but as such it is clearly invalid. (Or maybe the whole idea of an inference is out of place. J. L. Austin observed that while noticing crumbs on the table leads us to infer that bread is somewhere around, noticing a loaf of bread on the table does not lead us to infer that bread is somewhere around.)

Williams himself is defensive about his use of the term "inference" since, as he says, it suggests the need for formal codification according to rules. "Resemblance inference" doesn't meet that requirement; it is something that just happens, the product, according to Hume/Williams, of "habit assisted imagination." Williams is struck by and frequently recurs to an image from the *Treatise* where Hume says that the imagination "like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse" (T 198). Imagination glides easily over the temporal gap between an earlier and a later impression by supplying the "fiction" of a continuously existing object. The galley-like glide of the imagination is also said to account for our notion of the substantial self. Both fictions, material objects and the substantial self, are needed to make sense respectively of causal reasoning and intentional agency. To the extent that I understand this account, I do not find it persuasive. Does that mean that I am a closet rationalist or just that I am not a (fully licensed) Humean? I do not like transcendental arguments when couched in the language of pragmatism. That we "need" to assume that X exists if we are to give a satisfactory account of Y does not, in my book, count as evidence that X exists. Is my bias rationalist or nonrationalist?

What is the Humean/nonrationalist account of normativity, our conception of what it is that guides our choice of options among, say, causal explanations or among alternative courses of action? Without corrective devices of some sort, we are in for trouble. Custom, assisted by imagination, can lead us to accept wildly implausible hypotheses. In the practical sphere, determining social policy, for example, the galley-like glide can bring us to take shelter in harbors that are neither safe nor acceptable—racist or sexist politics, for example. Descartes offers us criteria in one area, Kant in another. Both, on

Williams's view, owe their attractions to the appearance of a noble simplicity and both are fraudulent. Reason does not have the great self-corrective powers that rationalists subscribe to. Clear and distinct ideas are unreliable and the Categorical Imperative turns out not to apply in particular cases. What we have instead is our inclinations, and we ought not to assume with the dyspeptic theologians that our inclinations are inherently wayward. There is no point in telling people that they should strive to be disinterested. In appropriate contexts, disinterestedness comes naturally. If we are too close (or too far away) from a painting to tell whether it is any good or not, we step backward (or forward) without any strenuous intellectual effort until we have it in the proper perspective. An official enemy, even one who is genuinely dangerous, may nonetheless be admired for his intelligence, equanimity, or courage. Where we know our own prejudice, we try to compensate for it when making decisions. Hume's implicit recommendation and, I take it, Williams's, is that we give up our Cartesian and Kantian pretensions and learn to appreciate the facts of the matter. Human stupidity and malice are real, but they are only part of the story. Tolerance and a sense of fairness are also observable features of the "human frame," and often, if not always, can be counted upon.

There is a tendency, Williams observes, to distinguish the "good" Hume, who works hard at developing arguments, both polemical and constructive, from the "bad" Hume, who gives up serious philosophy to consort with the "vulgar," the nonintellectuals who are not bothered by the paradoxes and fragility of their assumptions about knowledge of the world and of right and wrong. The "bad" Hume enjoys backgammon and convivial dinner parties. His writing is confined to popular essays intended to please the crowd and enhance his literary reputation. Williams claims, and I think correctly, that this Jekyll-Hyde portrait is false and unfair and should be replaced by a different dichotomy, one that recognizes a difference between "malign" skepticism and "benign" skepticism. In *Treatise* I iv, Hume argues that neither reason nor sense experience support any valid claims to knowledge, and the argument has often been taken as an across-the-board attack on reason and experience. According to Williams, this assumption is false. Hume's target is not human epistemic incapacity but the pretensions of rationalism. Taken seriously, such pretensions lead to contradiction, and thus rationalism is shown by its own standards to be disqualified. Malign skepticism is the logical consequence of a demonstrably false doctrine. Once persuaded that there is something misguided, indeed perverse, in rationalism, we are free to welcome a different view, namely nonrationalism, in which reason is not confined to deductive inference but extends to the whole of our intellectual, emotional, and social life. (Hume himself exploits the ambiguity and often speaks of reason in a sense that would make one's preferring the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger a paradigm of what is "contrary to reason") (T 415). What looked at first like a conflict (or irresponsibility) in Hume, is really an integral

part of his elaborate negative campaign, a campaign that for prudential or political reasons is never explicitly announced.

Benign skepticism is the nonrationalist creed; it sanctions, without endorsing, the beliefs of the intelligent nonphilosopher, the "vulgar." We need not bow to the authority or exaggerate the virtues of the vulgar. That is what the irrationalist or the social conservative would do. But since philosophy, in Hume's term "refined reflections," are sometimes arduous and discouraging, and since all of us, except in our classrooms or studies, are ineluctably vulgar, it is reasonable to spend time with those whose wisdom is displayed in practical and social contexts. Of course the vulgar can get pretty boring too, and when that happens, we follow our inclinations again and return to our studies and our refined reflections. There may be in some sense two different worlds, but Hume often depicts himself as a roving ambassador, one who, by his example, can induce inhabitants of the two worlds to give up their savage animosities and learn to appreciate what each has to offer.

Some of the most interesting of Williams's theses have not been discussed. I commend in particular his final chapter, "Persons and Artworks." It is highly original and stands on its own feet. Although Humean in spirit, it has little to do with Humean aesthetics but bears directly on Kant's distinction between "dignity" and "worth." I suppose that it signals a new direction for the nonrationalist inquirer.

Despite the occasional obscurity and organizational difficulties I have mentioned, *A Cultivated Reason* is an important and a rewarding essay. I am tempted to think of it as a draft for a longer and more clearly articulated book. Still, inchoate as it is, the breath of life is there and the author's manner is disarmingly ebullient. Such qualities are rare enough to make such a book worth waiting for.

NOTES

1. Following Williams, I will use the abbreviation "T" for *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

MARY MOTHERSILL
Riverside Drive #74A
New York, NY 10025
mm346@columbia.edu