Williams’ “The Human Prejudice”
Cosmic Viewpoints

God

The great chain of being

License judgments about what is better or worse, overall, that are not rooted in human practices, desires, or nature

Specifically, the value of humanity as compared to animals
Disenchanted world

For the sake of argument, grant Williams his atheism for now.

(But how much would it help anyway?)

God: Authority and right actions.

GCoB

These were ways of justifying a “cosmic viewpoint”, but they are no longer available.
Williams: these ideas have evolved into “secularized” versions

Nagel: we can ask about “the view from nowhere”, ethical facts divorced from any particular viewpoint

Rachels: you’ve no reason to be partial to your own interests
The principle of Equality rules out of court any doctrine that places any group outside the bounds of moral concern or that gives their interests less than full consideration. Racism and sexism are the most obvious doctrines that do this. Egoism is another. Egoism is the idea that it is permissible for each person to pursue his or her own interests exclusively—thus, there is no moral requirement that we take anyone else's interests into account when we are deciding what to do . . . .
Each of these doctrines draws a circle around some group and says that the interests of those within the circle count for more. Egoism is a view of the same kind. It draws the circle of concern in the narrowest possible way. . . . to expose what is wrong with Egoism, each of us may ask: what is the difference between myself and others that justifies regarding my interests as more important than everyone elses? What is it that makes me so special? Am I more capable than others of enjoying life? Do I care more about my life? Am I more sensitive to suffering? Am I somehow more deserving? To all these questions the answer is plainly no . . . .
Failing to find any other general justification for regarding my own interests as special, I might fall back on the fact that I am I. . . . how can anything of moral importance follow from the trivial truth that I am the person that I am, unless this is combined with the further non-trivial thought that somehow I am different from others? (James Rachels, quoted in the Appendix to Rachels and Alter, 2005, “Nothing Matters in Survival” 327–9)
Cosmic view in contemporary philosophy cont.

Kant: any rule you use has to be *universalizable*.

Utilitarians: maximize pleasure (/well-being), it doesn't matter whose.

Lots of people: *moral* reasons are general; moral reasons are reasons for everyone. Contrast judgments of (mere) taste.

Williams' contrasting view.
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The Ideal Observer

Williams objects to one (prominent) version of this sort of secularized view, the Ideal Observer (IO).

The Ideal Observer: the good states of affairs are the ones that would be judged to be so by an ideally informed, very smart and rational, impartial but benevolent.

The specific utilitarian version: such a figure’s benevolence means he wants to minimize suffering and maximize pleasure.

*He does look, of course, a lot like a slimmed-down surrogate of the Christian God, and this may well suggest that he represents yet another re-enactment of the cosmic point of view: suffering or its absence is what has absolute importance.* (Williams 145)
Even if we thought that the IO's outlook were a reliable guide to what would be a better state of affairs, how is that connected to what we—each of us—should be trying to do? (Williams 146)

The consequentialist’s answer.

A more specific complaint:

The question arises, whether we should not be in the business of reducing the harm that other animals cause one another . . . (Williams 146)
Singerian responses

- There are instrumental reasons that justify not interfering like this
- Is it so clear that we don’t wish to minimize such suffering?

Note well! This seems to be an objection against a certain grand ethical theory, version of utilitarianism. It’s hazier how to object in this way to the specific argument from Singer’s article.
Williams Second Objection

“Taking on” the IO’s viewpoint would drive us nuts!

(So what?)

Or we would want to annihilate the world

(Would we?)

Perhaps a better way to make this point: if it were true that this (annihilation) were the verdict of the theory, we would surely reject the theory. Simple utilitarianism doesn’t capture the complexity and richness of our valuing and moral decision-making.
But this isn’t clearly a good objection against IO, instead of against some crude utilitarianism....

Further: should we reject IO, or change our practices?

Williams: once we reject the cosmic viewpoint, it makes sense that humans and humanity will play a privileged role in the content of our ethical theories. For those ethical theories are elaborations of what we humans value.
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Forced Choices and Special Relationships

Mother-stranger

Baby-dog

Singer’s response

Problem: Singer’s response is not universal—consider the marginal cases

Alternate explanation through special relationships

Loyalty to one’s own community

Aliens, “Which side are you on?”, disgustingness
How are such arguments not to justify racism, sexism, and so on? Williams’ argument can be caricatured—how would he maintain it is an unfair caricature, though, and not just another application of his ideas?

“The white point of view”

The sort of disgust Williams says we hold for the aliens in his example is not so far from how other races have been viewed!

Loyalty to the white community, the white way of life, etc.
The Consequences of Loyalty

Robert E. Lee:

I shall never bear arms against the Union, but it may be necessary for me to carry a musket in the defense of my native state, Virginia, in which case I shall not prove recreant to my duty.

Mr. Blair, I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned the four millions of slaves in the South I would sacrifice them all to the Union; but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native state?
Forced Choices again

An obvious response: special relationships like this should not justify these sorts of harms to others, but that doesn’t mean they have *no* force.

Consider forced choice white-black. Would we allow that someone who saved a person of the same race did something permissible? Or is this not the right sort of difference to make a *moral* difference?

What could Williams say is the difference between speciesism and racism?