

# **Towards An Unprejudiced Ethical Theory. Extending moral considerability to non-sentient natural beings after having recognized Singer's and Williams' positions as flawed by prejudice<sup>1</sup>**

Martina Zanetti\*

## *Abstract*

The present essay, after illustrating the debate between Peter Singer and Bernard Williams on the issues of speciesism and prejudice, will counter Singer's and Williams' positions. Singer's application of the principle of equal consideration of interests only to sentient beings will be recognized as a prejudice in the Williamsian sense of the term, namely a thesis without justificatory reasons. Singer accusing Williams of speciesism will in turn be charged of *sufferism* or *sentientism*, an ethical position in which moral considerability only extends to those who have sentience and are thus capable of suffering. At the same time, Williams' theory that human interest should be placed first by humans will itself be identified as a prejudice. The proposed *destruens* analysis aims to draw together, in the conclusion, preliminary suggestions concerning the elaboration of an unprejudiced ethical theory including moral considerability for non-sentient natural beings. Methodologically, Williams' notions of "prejudice" and "ethical theory" will be used as an indicator of the validity of the considered ethical thoughts.

*Keywords: prejudice, ethical theory, speciesism, humanism, expansion of moral considerability, sentience, non-sentient natural beings.*

Il presente saggio, dopo aver illustrato il dibattito tra Peter Singer e Bernard Williams sui temi dello specismo e del pregiudizio, contesterà le posizioni di Singer e Williams. L'applicazione da parte di Singer del principio dell'eguale considerazione degli interessi ai soli esseri senzienti sarà riconosciuta come un pregiudizio nel senso

---

<sup>1</sup> Saggio ricevuto in data 04/11/2022 e pubblicato in data 14/08/2023.

\* Dottoranda presso la Scuola Superiore IUSS Pavia e la Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, e-mail: [martina.zanetti@santannapisa.it](mailto:martina.zanetti@santannapisa.it)

williamsiano del termine, cioè una tesi priva di ragioni giustificatrici. Singer che accusa Williams di specismo sarà a sua volta tacciato di sofferismo (*sufferism*) o senzientismo (*sentiencism*), una posizione etica in cui la considerabilità morale si estende solo a coloro che sono senzienti e sono quindi capaci di soffrire. Allo stesso tempo, la visione di Williams secondo cui l'interesse umano dovrebbe essere messo al primo posto dal soggetto sarà essa stessa identificata come un pregiudizio. L'analisi *destruens* proposta mira a raccogliere suggerimenti preliminari riguardanti l'elaborazione di una teoria etica non viziata da pregiudizi che includa la considerabilità morale per gli esseri naturali non senzienti. Metodologicamente, le nozioni di “pregiudizio” e “teoria etica” di Williams saranno utilizzate come indicatori della validità dei pensieri etici considerati.

*Parole chiave: pregiudizio, teoria etica, specismo, umanesimo, espansione della considerabilità morale, senzienza, esseri naturali non senzienti.*

### *Introduction*

The ultimate aim of the present work is to pave the way for an ethical position extending moral considerability to non-sentient natural beings.<sup>2</sup> Before treating this, I will consider previous literature debates on this topic and evaluate them. More precisely, Singer's argument extending moral considerability to any sentient being on the basis of the principle of equal consideration of interests and Williams' humanist perspective will be chosen among other postures in the field and analysed. Specifically, by making use of Williams' notion of prejudice, Singer's argumentation will be recognized as invalid. His perspective will be classified as a prejudice named *sufferism* or *sentiencism* by claiming that he does not provide sufficient justificatory reasons for adopting sentience as the discriminating factor for moral considerability. It will be suggested that behind Singer's position there are emotional reasons rather than rational ones.

Additionally, it will be considered whether Williams' counter-argument to Singer's theory, namely Williams' stance that moral considerability should only be limited to humans, is a valid argument or not. Finally, also Williams' point will be recognized as a prejudiced stance. Before concluding, a possible objection related to the notion of “ultimate prejudice” will be presented.

Recognizing Singer's and Williams' positions as flawed by prejudice and countering them will constitute the starting point for elaborating an ethical theory

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term non-sentient natural beings to indicate those natural entities excluded by Singer in his vision of moral considerability since they are not sentient, both organic and inorganic ones. The adjective natural is used to exclude from my analysis those non-sentient entities that are artificial.

which is, hopefully, not prejudiced, as the title suggests. After having verified that Williams' argument against the expansion of moral considerability outside humans does not represent a threat for the creation of an ethical theory including moral considerability for sentient and non-sentient natural beings because prejudiced, in the conclusion, some tentative suggestions as to what other discriminating factors – rather than sentience – could be chosen to justify the just-mentioned ethical theory will be proposed.

This is what will be treated in the present work, a *destruens* part presenting and countering Singer's and Williams' positions regarding the debate around ethical theory, speciesism, and prejudice and a preliminary outline of a *construens* argument about an ethical theory including moral considerability for non-sentient natural beings. I would like to underline once again that the *construens* part of the argument will not be entirely treated here; the word "towards" in the title suggests exactly this.

As to the structure of the paper, I will first (i) illustrate Singer and Williams' debate around speciesism and, immediately after, I will (ii) oppose Singer's position by affirming that it is a prejudice. To argue this, I will, on the one hand, draw on (ii.i) Williams' and Brennan's works while, on the other, I will propose (ii.ii) some original observations. Further on, (iii) Williams' position will be countered, and (iv) some considerations involving moral considerability for non-sentient natural beings will be proposed. As to methodology, as I have already anticipated, Williams' notions of *prejudice* and *ethical theory* will be used as an indicator of the validity of the considered ethical thoughts.

In the following paragraph, the debate between Williams and Singer on the issue of speciesism will be presented.

### 1. *State of the art: Singer and Williams' debate*

The history of philosophy is full of disputes between different thinkers firing back at each other. Among the most famous are Aristotle and Plato's debate as to the issue of forms or Spinoza and Descartes's one around the relationship between mind and body.<sup>3</sup> Another remarkable one, closer to the present day, is Peter Singer and Bernard Williams' controversy revolving around the notions of ethical theory, speciesism, and prejudice, which emerged between the late 1970s and the early 2000s. Singer, on the one hand, accuses humanism – a perspective supporting the centrality of humans in the ethical sphere and defined by him as "speciesism" – of

---

<sup>3</sup> W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, in R. McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Random House, New York 1941; D. Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, OUP, Oxford 1986; J. H. Nichols (tr. and ed.), *Phaedrus*, Cornell University Press, New York 1998; C. Rowe, *Plato, Republic*, Penguin Books, New York 2012; R. Descartes, J. Cottingham, B. Williams, *Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996; B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in E. Curley (trans. and ed.), *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and other works*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994.

being a form of prejudice to the same degree as racism and sexism. On the other hand, Williams counters Singer by asserting that humanism cannot be considered a form of prejudice since it coincides with our ultimate essence.<sup>4</sup>

The claims just proposed will be explained thoroughly in the course of the paper. In the following lines, I will start by defining the concept of speciesism and by proposing Singer's position on it.

### 1.1. Singer's position on speciesism

Within animal ethics, a new controversy arose with the introduction of the term "speciesism". The word was coined by Richard Ryder in 1970 in a privately printed leaflet published in Oxford and then further analysed in his 1971 work *Experiments on Animals*. Ryder argued that speciesism is an «unintelligent out-of-date sort of prejudice against the other species», and he drew an analogy between it and other prejudices like racism and sexism.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Ryder's theory, Peter Singer has defined speciesism precisely as a «prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of the members of other species».<sup>6</sup> According to him, it is a kind of prejudice that has no better foundations of the bias of regarding higher the interests of white people with respect to the ones of non-white people.<sup>7</sup> Like racists, in case of a conflict of interest, speciesists would give preeminent importance to the preferences of the components of their group – in this case humans – rather than to those of the other

---

<sup>4</sup> B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, in A.W. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, pp. 135-152. The use of the term "humanism" in Williams' works and in the present one should be reconducted to "renaissance humanism". During the Renaissance, emphasis was again placed on the dignity and autonomy of the individual, to the extent of considering man at the centre of the universe. The cultural movement indicating this change takes the name of Humanism. The stance advanced by humanism is clearly an anthropocentric one. Relative to what will be proposed later in this essay, we can specifically say that humanism, starting from the general greater importance it assigns to the human dimension, gives moral priority to the human species rather than to non-human animal species (B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, cit., p. 135; R. Grudin, *Humanism* [ad vocem], in «*Encyclopaedia Britannica*», 2019 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanism>>; P.G. Della Mirandola, F. Borghesi, M. Papio, M. Riva, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012).

<sup>5</sup> R.D. Ryder, *Speciesism Again: the original leaflet*, in «Critical Society», 2, 2010, p. 1 <<http://www.veganzetta.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Speciesism-Again-the-original-leaflet-Richard-Ryder.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals*, Thorsons Publishers Limited, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire 1983, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, 3rd ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 49.

group – in this case animals –.<sup>8</sup> But Singer argues that there is no rational basis for doing that.<sup>9</sup>

Singer's view relies on the *principle of equal consideration of interests*, the basic principle of equality, according to him.<sup>10</sup> When he first presents it, Singer refers it to human beings. He claims that equality among people can only be reached by equally weighting the interests of all humans, taking into consideration all the dissimilarities that are present between them.<sup>11</sup> Particularly relevant for the present analysis is the fact that Singer, soon afterwards, asserts that the scope of the principle should not just be restricted to humans; in his words: «[w]hen we accept the principle of equality for humans, we are also committed to accepting that it extends to some nonhuman animals».<sup>12</sup> According to Singer, as, on the basis of the principle of equal consideration of interests, we are not entitled to consider the interests of people belonging to other ethnicities in a different way, so in the same way we should not do it with members of another species.<sup>13</sup> Singer's principle of equal consideration of interests rests on a utilitarian justification. The discriminating factor for taking the interest of a being into consideration is, in his view, the fact that it can suffer. On this, he claims that «[t]he capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way».<sup>14</sup> According to Singer, when it comes to suffering, we should consider the severity of pain felt by an animal and by a human as equivalent, and we should act to relieve the greater suffering by applying the principle of equal consideration of interests.<sup>15</sup> In Singer's view, the suffering of a mouse has the same importance as the suffering of a person, and priority should be given to relieving the greater agony.<sup>16</sup> More precisely, he asserts that «pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad, whether felt by humans or animals».<sup>17</sup> The lack of such equivalent consideration is the core of Singer's critique against speciesists, who give preeminent importance to the interests of the components of their species, the human one.

---

<sup>8</sup> p. 50. For simplicity and to improve reading fluency, in the present work, I will use the term “animal” instead of “non-human animal” since it is often close to the term “human”.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> p. 20; p. 46; p. 48

<sup>11</sup> pp. 48-49

<sup>12</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> pp. 50-51. Singer clarifies that, in some situations, a member of one species will suffer more than a member of another species. For instance, the suffering of a person who is conscious about what suffering is will be higher since there is also a psychological component to it.

<sup>17</sup> p. 53.

### 1.2. Williams' counter-argument to Singer's view

To treat Williams' counter-argument to Singer's position, it is necessary to present, first, Williams' definition of prejudice and of ethical theory.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams affirms that *prejudice* is a claim not based on reflective reasons.<sup>18</sup> According to Williams, the concept of prejudice is in opposition with the one of *ethical theory*.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in Williams' view, the only type of reflection that leads to ethical theory is the critical reflection «that seeks *justificatory reasons*», the opposite of unreflective prejudice.<sup>20</sup> Central to Williams' thought is the idea that, when presented with an ethical theory, people will ask for reasons to follow it.<sup>21</sup> Williams asserts that racism and sexism are prejudices in this sense; a racist saying that a black person is less morally valuable than a white person has no rational justificatory reasons for that.<sup>22</sup>

In more detail, Williams proposes two understandings of the term prejudice, namely a “Cartesian account” and a “narrower” one.<sup>23</sup> According to the Cartesian view, «any belief counts as a prejudice that has not yet been given a foundation». <sup>24</sup> On the other hand, prejudice in the narrower sense «means any belief one holds only because one has not reflected on it». <sup>25</sup> The difference between the two accounts is that the Cartesian one does not imply reflection at all and, thus, not even the one seeking justificatory reasons. The narrower one could involve some types of reflection, such as the explanatory one, but still not the one seeking justificatory reasons.<sup>26</sup> Both understandings of the term, therefore, are in opposition with the concept of ethical theory.<sup>27</sup>

I will go back now to presenting Williams' argument against Singer's position. Before doing that, it should be said that Singer's thesis can be divided into two parts: that (1) speciesism is a prejudice, and that (2) speciesism can be put at the

---

<sup>18</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Routledge Classics, London and New York 2011, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> When, in the paper, I will talk about the validity of an ethical theory, I will mean whether it can exist, whether there are some justificatory reasons capable of supporting its existence. And I am assuming that a valid ethical theory is an ethical theory in Williams' sense.

<sup>21</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., pp. 124-125. Elsewhere in the book, Williams outlines his scepticism about the true existence of a sound ethical theory and of reasons to justify it, but I will not take that into consideration here (p. 126; p. 235).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*. In the present work, I will consider the notion of prejudice at the general level, not making specific reference neither to the Cartesian account nor to the narrower one since they both contrast the concept of ethical theory, and this is what I am interested in.

same level of racism or sexism. Williams' counter-argument will be presented following this partition. I will start with the latter.

As to (2), Williams proposes an argument about the difference between speciesism and racism. On this, he affirms: «[i]f there is a human prejudice it is structurally different from those other prejudices, racism and sexism».<sup>28</sup> Williams claims that the reasons supporting racism and sexism are very poor reasons – Williams is referring here to non-justificatory reasons –, both because they are not true and because they are the result of false consciousness. In Williams' view, no sophisticated social and psychological theories are necessary to demonstrate this.<sup>29</sup> With regard to the “supposed human prejudice” he says that the story is completely different.<sup>30</sup> First, because in the case of speciesism «it is not simply a matter of inarticulate or unexpressed discrimination: it is no secret that we are in favour of human rights».<sup>31</sup> Williams affirms that «human beings are more important to *us*», opposing the speciesist accusation towards humanism of giving «absolute importance» to human beings.<sup>32</sup> Second, the reason “it's a human being” does not seem to be ruled out by further rational reasons, as in the case of racism.<sup>33</sup> The behavioural gap between humans and animals is a good enough justificatory reason to say that humans' interests should be preferred to animals' ones.<sup>34</sup> These reasons are also part of Williams' justification of why a human prejudice does not exist at all – the first level of analysis of Singer's position indicated above – and this is what will be explored now.

As to (1), namely that speciesism is a prejudice, Williams' rejection against taking humanism as a prejudice has its roots in his refusal of indirect utilitarianism. According to Williams, indirect utilitarianism distinguishes between theory and practice; but this, he says, cannot happen.<sup>35</sup> Williams asserts that some variants of indirect utilitarianism locate theory in an abstract reality, differentiating it from the space where practice will take place.<sup>36</sup> In the psychological variant, subjects elaborate their thoughts in an imaginary scenario somewhere in the universe, and then they apply them to their practical life within planet Earth. Williams' counterpoint is that any method of theorizing in that way would still belong to life, would be within it; it would itself be a specific type of practice.<sup>37</sup> According to Williams, it is not possible to distinguish, apart from within imaginary scenarios,

---

<sup>28</sup> B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> p. 140.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> p. 140.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 122.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

«the theorist in oneself from the self whose dispositions are being theorized».<sup>38</sup> Williams affirms that our claims must be rooted in a human perspective; it is not feasible to cut off from our anthropological point of view on reality and to adopt an «“absolute conception” of it», considering our inclinations from an angle that is external to us.<sup>39</sup> Williams does not think that it is possible to adopt «the point of view of the universe».<sup>40</sup> In Williams’ view, since no «cosmic point of view» and ultimate significance exist, no other outlook apart from ours within which we discuss the relevance of our actions can be present.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Williams’ main argument in saying that humanism cannot be considered a form of prejudice is that humanism coincides with our ultimate nature and essence, our being human, from which we cannot detach.<sup>42</sup> This account is linked to the Cartesian understanding of prejudice, as presented above. Williams affirms that, from a Cartesian perspective, everything is a prejudice. According to the Cartesian method of doubt, I should doubt about everything; but this would lead to global scepticism, and prejudice would result infinite. Descartes says that the only way to avoid scepticism is the *cogito*, it is a human thinking mind. Without establishing knowledge on the human being, we should doubt about our existence, about mathematics, about everything.<sup>43</sup> The human prejudice would be the ultimate prejudice after which there is no knowledge; by eliminating the human point of view, we do not have a true foundation for knowledge.

Saying that the only existing point of view is the human one automatically rules out the possibility of a hypothetical animal perspective. Williams distinguishes between «whose questions these are» and «whose interests will be referred to in the answers».<sup>44</sup> According to Williams, the answer to the first matter is “human”; we, humans, are the subject of ethical issues. *We* raise questions, *we* – human beings – discuss among ourselves, and *we* manage the planet through policies *we* choose. In Williams’ view, only humans can have values.<sup>45</sup> We are the thinking subjects, the ethically enquiring subjects. Animals can only be the object of these thoughts, and it can never be otherwise. Animals can never be ethically thinking subjects, they can only be the «*content* of our values».<sup>46</sup> Animals do not interrogate themselves on how

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> p. 123; See also p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, cit., p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> p. 135; p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> R. Descartes, A.D. Lindsay, J. Veitch (trans), *A discourse on method [and] Meditations on the first philosophy [and] Principles of philosophy*, Dent, London 1912.

<sup>44</sup> B. Williams, *Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?*, in B. Williams, *Making Sense of humanity and other philosophical papers 1982 - 1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 234.

<sup>45</sup> B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, cit., p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> p. 141.



to treat other animals or on how to treat us. In Williams' words: «[o]ther animals are good at many things, but not at asking for or understanding justifications. [...] Other animals will never come of age: human beings will always act as their trustees». <sup>47</sup> As far as the content of our thinking is concerned, «in relation to them [animals] the only moral question for us is how we should *treat* them». <sup>48</sup>

For Williams, the content of our enquiries – his second issue proposed above, the other matter with respect to “whose questions these are” – is still an anthropocentric one. Being the object of ethical subjects' thoughts does not give animals any advantage, and Williams thinks humans still have precedence. Even if, in the first instance, he asserts that our way of approaching these issues should not be barely anthropocentric, and thus, the possibility of a different outcome seems to be present, the conclusion he reaches is that «our refusal of the anthropocentric must itself be a human refusal». <sup>49</sup> Rejecting an anthropocentric answer to the second question, thus refusing to give prominence to the interests of humans, would mean to detach ourselves from our human perspective but, as already shown, this is not possible according to Williams.

### 1.3. *The follow-ups: Singer and Williams responding to each other*

As far as Singer's response to this is concerned, Singer accepts Williams' stance according to which the values taken into consideration are humans insofar as they have been elaborated and developed by human beings, thus Williams' first point. But he claims that this does not rule out the chance of formulating values that would be approved by any rational human beings capable of empathizing with other beings. <sup>50</sup> Furthermore, according to Singer, the fact that our values are human does not express anything about their content, specifically, about whether we should give greater moral consideration to our pains, pleasures, and lives than to non-human animal ones. <sup>51</sup>

The counter-argument offered here by Williams is that «it is simply better that culture, intelligence, technology should flourish – as opposed, presumably, to all those other amazing things that are done by other species which are on the menu». <sup>52</sup> Recalling the definition of prejudice given by Williams, namely an assertion without a justificatory reason, this is the required reason with which Williams justifies the assumption that animals should have less moral relevance. For Williams, saying “it's

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem* (italics in original).

<sup>49</sup> B. Williams, *Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?*, cit., p. 240.

<sup>50</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, cit., p. 138; p. 141.

a human being” is enough as a justificatory reason for giving an anthropocentric answer also to the issue “whose interests will be referred to in the answers”.

In the following paragraphs, I will propose some other counter-arguments to both Singer’s and Williams’ theories. I will start by opposing Singer’s one.

## 2. Countering Singer’s positions

I will now explore, first, a non-Williamsian argument countering Singer’s position drawn on literature, and then, I will propose some original ones.

### 2.1. *Speciesism is not anything like racism*

As already said before, Singer’s thesis can be divided into two parts: that (1) speciesism is a prejudice, and that (2) it can be put at the same level of racism. The first non-Williamsian counter-argument that will be presented in the following lines refers specifically to this second level of argumentation.

Speciesism cannot be considered a prejudice at the same level of racism – where prejudice, as already said, is an assertion without a justificatory reason – because the biological difference between species, differently from the one between races, has a scientific foundation. There are valid scientific reasons to base the assertion.<sup>53</sup> The validity of these scientific reasons leaves open the possibility of making different moral considerations for speciesism compared to those made for racism. I will clarify my intuition by proposing Brennan’s position on this, according to which «speciesism – whatever it is – is not anything like racism».<sup>54</sup>

To verify whether it is possible to say that speciesism can be considered at the same level of racism, Brennan proposes a parallel between scientific racism and «scientific speciesism», a mind creation to try to verify the theory at stake.<sup>55</sup> Three representative claims of scientific racism are, according to Brennan, that R(i) some biological characteristics are crucial to have some other features – not specifically biological – proper of a given race; that R(ii) the presumed races, characterized by groups of specific social, linguistic and other not necessarily biological features, can be classified in terms of relative superiority and inferiority of these given features. Brennan’s third point R(iii) is that «the ordering in R(ii) corresponds to orderings of cultural and moral values which legitimate lower degrees of protection and rights for

---

<sup>53</sup> When it comes to scientific concepts such as races and species, considering scientific reasons is appropriate since the field of investigation is a scientific one.

<sup>54</sup> A. Brennan, *Humanism, Racism and Speciesism*, in «Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology», 7.3, 2003, p. 300 <[https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/7/3/article-p274\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/7/3/article-p274_3.xml)>.

<sup>55</sup> p. 296.

members of the groups that are inferior vis a vis those that are superior with respect to the characteristics in question that this hierarchy is supported by morality».<sup>56</sup> In parallel, he proposes the hypothetical distinctive features of scientific speciesism, namely that S(i) some biological characteristics are crucial to have some other features – not specifically biological – proper of a given species; that S(ii) there is a natural hierarchy between species based on these specific characteristics, and that S(iii), starting from this hierarchy, it is possible to show different political and ethical behaviour in respect of the various species.<sup>57</sup> The analogy between racism and speciesism does not work according to Brennan because, in the first instance, the parallel fails with respect to the first two features of each belief.<sup>58</sup> If, on the one hand, R(ii) is denied by science, S(ii) is affirmed by it; science does differentiate among species that can be hierarchically ordered because of their features.<sup>59</sup> In a hypothetical hierarchical scale of climbing ability snakes are at a lower level than monkeys and, in one of transitive inferential reasoning ability, worms are inferior to pigeons.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, as far as R(iii) and S(iii) – respectively depending on R(ii) and S(ii) – are concerned, while R(iii) has no possibility to subsist since R(ii) is denied, the fact that S(ii) is not denied leaves some open space for S(iii) to be true.<sup>61</sup> Brennan argues that there is no clear answer whether S(iii) is evidently inadmissible from a moral perspective.<sup>62</sup> Brennan's conclusion is that considering humanism just as a «bias or prejudice akin to “speciesism” [...] is misleading and simplistic».<sup>63</sup> He argues that racism is a complicated issue and that there is no evident similarity between it and the «supposed prejudice of “speciesism”».<sup>64</sup>

In the following lines, another argument countering Singer's position – an original one, this time – will be proposed. It will refer to the first level of analysis of Singer's argument, namely “speciesism is a prejudice”.

## 2.2. *An original counter-argument to Singer's thesis that speciesism is a prejudice*

To advance my counter-argument, I will make use of Williams' philosophy. More specifically, I will try to understand whether Singer's ethical thought can be considered an ethical theory in Williams' sense or not. If the reasons given by Singer will not be justificatory reasons but will be recognized as prejudiced one, Singer's

---

<sup>56</sup> p. 293.

<sup>57</sup> A. Brennan, *Humanism, Racism and Speciesism*, cit., p. 295.

<sup>58</sup> p. 297.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> p. 274.

thought will not be recognized as a Williamsian ethical theory.<sup>65</sup> The considered counter-argument will refer to the first part of Singer's thesis, namely "speciesism is a prejudice".

To help follow the line of reasoning proposed in the coming section, I will briefly recall Singer's argument. According to Singer, speciesism is a prejudice, in the common sense meaning of the term, a bias, a claim without a rational foundation.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, in his view, it is rational to say that humans and animals should have the same moral considerability. At the basis of Singer's claim there is the preference utilitarian *principle of equal consideration of interests*, namely giving equal moral weight to the interests of all those affected.<sup>67</sup> Precisely on it, Singer claims:

The essence of the principle of equal consideration of interests is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions. This means that if only X and Y would be affected by a possible act, and if X stands to lose more than Y stands to gain, it is better not to do the act. We cannot, if we accept the principle of equal consideration of interests, say that doing the act is better, despite the facts described, because we are more concerned about Y than we are about X. What the principle really amounts to is: an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be.<sup>68</sup>

However, what does this entail? To enrich the explanation of Singer's position and open the way for proposing my argument, I will build a case study on the basis of a situation involving two injured people mentioned by Singer.<sup>69</sup> B's injury is a non-severe one, and B's level of well-being is 9/10. A's injury is more severe than B's one, and A's level of well-being is 7/10. Let's suppose that the general interest, in this case, is to have a 9/10 level of well-being. Let's decide to make use of a reference system in which one dose of morphine corresponds to one unit of well-being. B's condition could improve, reaching 10/10, by taking one dose of morphine, and A, to reach 10/10, would need three doses of morphine. But, since 9/10 is the threshold that should be reached by applying Singer's principle, two doses of morphine are given to A instead of giving one to B and one to A because it is more important, according to Singer's utilitarianism, to let everybody reach the threshold level of interest instead of helping someone who already is at that level to go above it. There is, within Singer's theory, this dimension of a universal general level of interest that is, in this case, "being at 9/10". Singer himself says that his approach can lead to what could be referred to as inegalitarian results, but this is to satisfy a supposed general interest, and doing so, in Singer's view, is an impartial

---

<sup>65</sup> I use the term "ethical thought" to refer to an ethical stance neutrally, without having recognized it or not as an ethical theory in Williams' sense of the term.

<sup>66</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>69</sup> p. 23.

solution. Equal consideration of interests means that the interest of all those affected to reach a given threshold of well-being, in this case 9/10, is weighted in the same way, and not that the personal interest of everyone, in this case reaching 10/10, is equally considered. It is like a general goal instead of a personal one. According to Singer, in making ethical judgments, «we must go beyond a personal or sectional point of view and take into account the interests of all those affected»; interests must be weighted «considered simply as interests and not as my interests».<sup>70</sup> This approach applies, according to Singer, as already mentioned, also to animals. In Singer's opinion, humans and animals should be given the same moral considerability, and not doing so, thus speciesism, is a prejudice.

According to Williams, the kind of critical reflection that leads to ethical theory is one that seeks justificatory reasons. In the considered example – Singer's ethical thought at stake here is: why should humans and animals be given the same level of moral considerability? –, the first justificatory reason is “because the interests of all should be considered at the same level, and thus, it is necessary to let everyone reach a given level”. Saying that both A and B must reach a given level of well-being is the justificatory reason for which 2/10 should be given to A. In a case in which A is a cow and B is a human, saying that 2/10 should be given to A – which is at 7/10 –, if B is already at 9/10, is justified by Singer's goal of making everyone reach 9/10. Thus, so far, Singer's argument, namely giving equal moral consideration to an animal and to a person, seems to be a belief that has been given a foundation, a belief with reflective reasons. So why should Singer's argument be considered a prejudice?

Within Singer's argument, there exist another fundamental element already mentioned in the previous paragraph but still not taken into account here. According to Singer, the considered subjects – A and B – have interests if and only if they suffer. Thus, the previous argument becomes: 2/10 should be given to A which is at 7/10 when B is already at 9/10, if and only if A suffers. And, according to Singer, this is also valid with sentient animals since they suffer. On this, he affirms that if a capacity for pain or any other form of consciousness is not present in the considered being, the principle of equal consideration of interests will not apply to them.<sup>71</sup> He precisely claims that «the capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way».<sup>72</sup> Resting on this, in Singer's view, the preferences of plants or a stone should not be taken into account. Singer, on this, claims: «[i]t would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests

---

<sup>70</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>72</sup> p. 50. Singer also affirms: «[a]s long as sentient beings are conscious, they have an interest in satisfying their desires, or in experiencing as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. Sentience suffices to place a being within the sphere of equal consideration of interest (p. 119)».

of a stone to be kicked along the road by a child. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer». <sup>73</sup> Similarly on plants he affirms:

It is significant that none of the grounds we have for believing that animals feel pain hold for plants. We cannot observe behaviour suggesting pain sensational claims to have detected feelings in plants by attaching lie detectors to them proved impossible to replicate and plants do not have a centrally organized nervous system like ours. <sup>74</sup>

But on what basis can we say that the preferences of plants or a stone should not be taken into account? Why should a plant or another non-sentient entity not have interests? Or since Singer, in his argument, more precisely, does not consider one's interest but a sort of general interest, why should the interest of a plant not be included in that general level of well-being? Why cannot we say that 2/10 should be given to A, which is at 7/10, if B is already at 9/10, with A being a river?

To help the reader better follow the drawing of the conclusions of the argument I am proposing here, I will now briefly recall and recapitulate the line of reasoning behind Singer's ethical thought. Regarding the question "why should all these interests be considered at the same level?", Singer proposes the justificatory reason "because they all suffer". The question that the interlocutor could pose to Singer here is: "and why can only those who suffer have interests?". Singer equates suffering with being conscious – not self-conscious – so the question could also be reformulated as "why should only the interests of conscious beings be taken into account?". <sup>75</sup> And the justificatory reason to this that could be derived, resting on the tradition on which Singer draws, is that only a conscious being can feel pleasure – more than pain – meant in a broad sense as a good which is desirable; and that something which is desirable should be maximized. <sup>76</sup> The complete stance is that only if you have the capacity of feeling pleasure you can have interests because pleasure – in a broad sense, what is preferable – should be maximized. At this point, the question that could be asked to Singer is "but why should experiencing something which is good or bad be the ultimate basis for ethics?". Singer's final reason for this fourth question is that it is obvious that it is so, that sentience is better than non-sentience, that experiencing something good is better than not experiencing it. He precisely says:

It seems obvious to me that both the Peopled Universe and the Happy Sheep Universe are better than the Nonsentient Universe, but at this

---

<sup>73</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 85; p. 92; p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 77.

point we are dealing with such basic values that it is difficult to find an argument that would persuade someone who denies this.<sup>77</sup>

But “it seems obvious” – where *seeming* is pure rhetoric – is the perfect formula for a prejudiced stance. On what basis can we say that a plant does not experience something good – something preferable – just because it does not have sentience? I do not think that sentience is the only way of experiencing something which is not bad. Singer’s points do not seem like a valid enough justificatory reason. According to Williams, «every reason requires a reason», and I cannot find a reason for that.<sup>78</sup> Why, only if you are capable of experiencing pleasure or pain, you can have interests seems to me to remain an open question, the one Singer’s theory is not capable of giving justificatory reasons for; the reason why Singer’s theory as a whole results in prejudice. The argument worked as long as justificatory reasons were given, but, since justificatory reasons cannot be given for the fourth question, the whole ethical thought – humans and animals should be given the same moral considerability – can be recognised as a prejudice in Williams’ sense because its line of reasoning seems to end with an irrational principle. And also the single questions in the line of reasoning are alike: Singer’s claim that *x has interests if and only if x suffers* – the one we are interested for the *construes* analysis – seems to be an unreflective prejudice.

Singer’s answer appears to be a prejudice also in his sense of the term, namely a partial, stereotyped vision of reality deriving from one’s viewpoint, one’s truth. Singer’s professed impartiality and universalizability do not seem to be met at all in this argument. By saying that only those who suffer should have moral considerability, Singer is not being impartial at all. Such a vision seems to come still from one side, from one point of view, a bit wider than the human one, but still too narrow, too limited. Singer accusing Williams of speciesism can in turn be accused of *sufferism* or *sentientism*, defined – recalling Singer’s definition of speciesism – as a “prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of those *who suffer* – «one’s own species» in Singer’s definition – and against those beings *who do not suffer* – «the members of other species» –”.<sup>79</sup> Still quoting him, it could be said that “[i]t seems to me a kind of prejudice that has no better foundations of the bias of regarding higher the interests of those *who suffer* with respect to *those who do not suffer*”.<sup>80</sup> Like racists, in a case of a conflict of interest, sufferists or sentientists would give preeminent importance to the preferences of the components of beings who suffer – animals – rather than to those of the other group – in this case plants, rivers, mountains –.<sup>81</sup> The fact that plants, rivers, mountains cannot experience animal pleasure – and this is what should be maximized in Singer’s view – does not seem to me enough as a

<sup>77</sup> p. 117.

<sup>78</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 128.

<sup>79</sup> P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man’s Inhumanity to Animals*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>81</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 50.

justificatory reason for not considering their interests. Singer's vision is an animal-centred prejudice.<sup>82</sup>

In the following paragraph, I will propose a further argument to support that Singer's point is a prejudice in Williams' sense.

### 2.2.1. *The emotional reasons behind Singer's thought*

Studies demonstrate that the similarity bias has a central role in the evolution of empathy towards animals.<sup>83</sup> Animals' behaviours or physical characteristics that closely resemble human ones increase human empathy towards animals.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, «[i]t has been shown that empathy towards animals, anthropomorphism (ie the tendency to attribute mental states and emotions similar to our own to other species) and beliefs in animal mind and sentience play an important role in shaping both concern for animal welfare and the human-animal relationship (Hills 1993; Serpell 2003; Butterfield et al 2012)».<sup>85</sup> Researchers also agree that these three factors are interlinked.<sup>86</sup> Colombo *et al* also add that the fact that people can understand others' suffering is linked to a negative experience, which can lead both to «prosocial behaviour, namely a behavioural effort to alleviate the distress of others and promote their welfare (de Waal 2008; Knafo et al 2008), and to personal distress, ie an excessive arousal that elicits defensive behaviours or strategies of affective control (Decety & Lamm 2011)».<sup>87</sup> The studies just mentioned offer a good scientific basis to affirm that Singer's arguments could rest on an emotional basis. Feelings towards animals arise in people because of psychological elements such as being similar or understanding what suffering is like. Maybe people see themselves or a loved one in animals that suffer, and they want to protect themselves or others from pain; or they could also have had some traumatic experiences with death. Nevertheless, such a mechanism is not a rational one, but rather an emotional one. Reasons emerging emotionally are come across as rational ones. And this would explain the fact that the justificatory reasons given by Singer are not valid ones, and this because the true source behind those moral statements is

---

<sup>82</sup> Again, the problem is not sentience, but the justification given here for sentience.

<sup>83</sup> E.S. Colombo, A. Pelosi, E. Prato-Previde, *Empathy towards animals and belief in animal-human continuity in Italian veterinary students*, in «Animal Welfare», 25, 2016, p. 276 doi:10.7120/09627286.25.2.275; H. Würbel, *Ethology applied to animal ethics*, in «Applied Animal Behaviour Science», 118, 2009, pp. 118-127 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2009.02.019>.

<sup>84</sup> E.S. Colombo, A. Pelosi, E. Prato-Previde, *Empathy towards animals and belief in animal-human continuity in Italian veterinary students*, cit., p. 276.

<sup>85</sup> E.S. Colombo, A. Pelosi, E. Prato-Previde, *Empathy towards animals and belief in animal-human continuity in Italian veterinary students*, cit., p. 275.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.



not rationality but rather emotionality. In this case, a bias arises because people want to categorize something as rational, even if this is not, just because they are emotionally convinced about it, they believe emotionally in it, and it becomes true for them. This is what seems to be the case here.

Before moving on to analyse my counter-argument to Williams' position, another problem with Singer's argument should be analysed.

### 2.3. *Suffering cannot be precisely quantified*

Singer asserts that «pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad» and that priority should be given to relieve the greater suffering.<sup>88</sup> Even if advances in pain assessment research have been made, it still does not seem possible to precisely quantify the intensity of pain felt by humans and animals.<sup>89</sup> Thus, comparing human and animal pain seems unfeasible. Comparisons are computations, and, to make them, it is necessary to know the exact magnitude of the elements being compared or at least to come close to it. The magnitude of the pain felt by the entities involved must be known numerically to establish which suffers more. But this does not seem possible with physical pain, and even less with psychological one. You cannot truly quantify a cow's suffering; it would be difficult as well to quantify the suffering of someone forced to avoid meat against their will. The comparison would be imprecise. It is not possible to precisely know whether the suffering of a human deriving from not eating meat is greater than the suffering of an animal dying. Suppose that a person has irritable bowel syndrome and that fibre from vegetables and legumes aggravates symptoms. On what basis can we say that his/her suffering is for sure less? Or, just considering pleasure, how can we be sure that the total pleasure experienced by people eating meat is not higher than the suffering of the animals dying for it? Singer uses the formula «for no good reason», but on what basis can we establish that human pleasure is not a good reason?<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., pp. 50-51; p. 53.

<sup>89</sup> Different methods of detecting pain in humans and animals seem to exist, but a way to precisely quantify it still does not seem to be present. T. Bendinger, N. Plunkett, *Measurement in pain medicine*, in «BJA Education», 16.9, 2016, pp. 310–315 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaed/mkw014>>; I. Hernandez-Avalos, D. Mota-Rojas, P. Mora-Medina, J. Martínez-Burnes, A. Casas Alvarado, A. Verduzco-Mendoza, K. Lezama-García, A. Olmos-Hernandez, *Review of different methods used for clinical recognition and assessment of pain in dogs and cats*, in «International Journal of Veterinary Science and Medicine», 18.7(1), 2019, pp. 43-54 doi: 10.1080/23144599.2019.1680044; L. Holton, P. Pawson, A. Nolan, *et al.*, *Development of a behaviour-based scale to measure acute pain in dogs*, in «Vet Rec», 148, 2001, pp. 525-531; J.C. De Grauw, J.M. Van Loon, *Systematic pain assessment in horses*, in «Vet J.», 209, 2016, pp. 14-22.

<sup>90</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., p. 51.

As to the experiments on animals for Botox that Singer mentions, on what basis can we assert that animal suffering when used for testing Botox is greater than the suffering of people who cannot inject Botox into their frown lines?<sup>91</sup> It is important not to be prejudiced in conducting this analysis, but rather ground argument only on logical reasoning and not on what has been said by others. Can this be affirmed resting only on reason? Basing on common ideology, this counter-argument could seem nonsense, but trying to think outside of our usual preconceptions, how can you quantify the suffering of the person not injected with Botox? And I am talking about psychological suffering here. Maybe the person wanting Botox suffers from depression, and seeing herself/himself different, maybe younger, would help with her/his mental health. I am not stating whether this is right or wrong, but rather what I am saying is that you cannot establish whether this is right or wrong by means of the analysed utilitarian principle, which seems to be based on non-justificatory reasons. The considered ethical thought as a whole – namely that pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad and that priority should be given to relieve the greater suffering – seems to be a prejudice, again in Williamsian sense but also in Singerian one.

On quantifying suffering Singer precisely says:

It may be objected that comparisons of the sufferings of different species are impossible to make, and that for this reason when the interests of animals and humans clash, the principle of equality gives no guidance. It is true that comparisons of suffering between members of different species cannot be made precisely. Nor, for that matter, can comparisons of suffering between different human beings be made precisely is not essential.<sup>92</sup>

But then Singer does not give a further explanation on this. And what he talks about here is exactly my point. Precision is necessary since you are comparing the two things. The Singerian ethical thought *the interests of a cow should be preferred to the interests of a human in the situation x because the cow suffers more* is based on the reason *the cow suffers more*. But it does not seem possible to give an answer to *why does the cow suffer more?*, so the presented ethical thought remains an unfounded and irrational belief, a Williamsian prejudice.

So far, it has been shown that Singer's arguments seem to be flawed by prejudice.<sup>93</sup> What about Bernard Williams' one?

---

<sup>91</sup> Singer precisely asserts: «[t]hese tests are not necessary to prevent human suffering: even if there were no alternative to the use of animals to test the safety of the products, it would be better to do without them, and learn to live with wrinkles, as most elderly people always have (p. 57)».

<sup>92</sup> P. Singer, *Practical ethics*, cit., pp. 52-53.

<sup>93</sup> Strictly speaking, the hypothetical ethical theory *the interests of a cow should be preferred to the interests of a human in the situation x because the cow suffers more* which is invalidated by the prejudice *the cow suffers more* can be considered either as an ethical theory of its own with respect to the Singerian ethical theory presented above – namely that animals should be given the same moral considerability as

### 3. Countering Williams' argument

As I have already anticipated, Williams too seems to propose a vision flawed by prejudice. The problem with Williams' theory is that he does not appear to distinguish ontologically between his first point «whose questions these are» and his second one «whose interests are referred to in the answer».<sup>94</sup> He affirms that if you are a human being, you must defend humans' interests. The fallacy appears to be linked to a coarse understanding of his conception of the “human point of view”.<sup>95</sup> I can see two meanings behind his use of this phrase. On the one hand, the notion of the human point of view in Williams seems to represent the fact that human thought – including ethics – is formulated resting on human mental structures, those which allow humans to experience reality in a specific way. The ethical thought is elaborated through human mental structures, it is forged by them. And so far, so good. I think this is a shared point; we all agree that humans can biologically understand reality only in this way – also Singer did –, that these are, thus, human questions. We can agree that philosophy, and specifically ethics, is a human construct, a product of the human mind.

Nevertheless, Williams seems to attribute to the considered expression also a second meaning. The concept of human perspective is intended by him also in the sense of interest, what is more beneficial to humans, the second question, thus. Williams seems to make these two shades of the phrase “human point of view” coincide, and from this perspective derives that the answer to his second issue “whose interests are referred to in the answer” is “humans”. He affirms that if you are a human, and, thus, you experience reality through human mental structures, you cannot place anything different but human interest in the first place. But the assertion “reality is perceived through human mental structures” does not seem enough as a justificatory reason for the proposition “human interest should be placed first”. Why, if I am human, can I not defend a non-human interest? Saying that humans, since they are human, can only have an anthropocentric perspective seems to be a prejudice, in Williams' sense. I am a human, I experience the world through human mental structures, but it should not be taken for granted that because I am human, because I see reality by means of human mental structures, I

---

humans – or as a corollary of this. When I say “arguments”, I am referring to both Singer's ethical thoughts, either considered as one single ethical theory (main argument and corollary) or two separate theories. But, for the purpose of the present investigation, since *the interests of x should be preferred to the interests of y if x suffers more* can be considered a passage within the ethical thought *animals should be given the same moral considerability as humans*, the prejudice that invalidates one passage of the considered ethical thought invalidates the whole ethical thought *animals should be given the same moral considerability as humans*.

<sup>94</sup> B. Williams, *Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?*, cit., p. 234.

<sup>95</sup> Id., *The Human Prejudice*, cit.

am interested in advancing my personal interests and other humans' interests rather than those of a tree. Let's analyse some extreme cases in which the interest of a non-sentient being is entirely chosen over human one. For instance, I could have no more relationships with humans, I could be dying and the only sweet memory of my life took place under that tree. Thus, asking for the interest of that tree to be preserved instead of the interest of all the other humans could be in my interest. Or again I might renounce humans, but love nature and ask for the interests of a river to be considered above those of other beings. Without taking into account such extreme examples, I could be a person who believes in a form of spirituality that recognises the rest of nature as alive, or, simply, I could be a rational human being understanding that humans have no privilege over other life forms, that we are all an aggregation of the same matter, and I could be interested, thus, in advancing my interest together with the one of other beings. I am human, I think by means of human mental structures, but the interest that I defend in the answers can also be a non-human interest.

The reason that Williams gives for his position "if you are human, you will have a human point of view" does not seem to me a justificatory reason at all, and, thus, it seems to be a prejudice.

### 3.1. *A clarification on the use of the term "prejudice"*

Before concluding, a clarification on how I have treated Williams' notion of prejudice is required. For the whole duration of this paper, I have been arguing that both Singer's and Williams' positions can be recognized as flawed with prejudice, and, methodologically, the reference system I have been using for affirming this is Williams' definition of ethical theory and prejudice. I have claimed that if an assertion is recognized as a prejudice, that same assertion will prevent the creation of an ethical theory since, according to Williams, prejudice is the opposite of ethical theory. In his view, the direct alternative to ethical theory is «to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice».<sup>96</sup> Thus, so far, I have been saying that neither Singer's nor Williams' positions can be recognized as ethical theories because they are not based on the critical reflection seeking justificatory reasons typical of ethical theory but on unreflective prejudice. But someone could take into consideration the following Williams' passage; with respect to ethical theory, which is constituted by giving a justificatory reason after the other, Williams affirms that «[a]t the end, if this linear search for reasons is pursued, there will have to be at least one practice of reason-giving for which no reason is given and which holds itself up».<sup>97</sup> According

---

<sup>96</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>97</sup> B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 125.

to Williams, in fact, in the Cartesian sense, «everything is a prejudice, in science as in ethics».<sup>98</sup>

In light of this quotation, the thesis of the paper, namely that Singer's and Williams' positions are a prejudice, could seem pointless. After all, Bernard Williams himself says that ethical theory admits prejudice. Resting on this, it would be wrong, since I am applying Williams' thought – without necessarily stating whether I agree or not – to verify whether an ethical theory can exist or not, to say that, generically, prejudice cannot be included in an ethical theory. In fact, Williams' theory admits the incorporation of prejudice within ethical theory in the form of *ultimate* prejudice. A prejudice, in Williams' sense of the term, is not a problem for the validity of an ethical theory *per se*, it is a problem if it is not an ultimate one. The notion of prejudice is opposed to the one of ethical theory if it is a mid-prejudice, if it is in the middle of the line of reasoning; but Williams admits the existence of an ultimate prejudice which is no more in opposition with the considered ethical theory, a prejudice that, on the contrary, becomes one with it.

On the basis of this, the form of my argument changes from recognizing that Singer's and Williams' arguments are prejudices to recognizing that Singer's and Williams' arguments are prejudices and not *ultimate* ones. It has been widely discussed throughout the paper why I consider them prejudices in Williams' sense – since they are not based on justificatory reasons –, but on what basis can I claim that neither Singer's nor Williams' theories are ultimate prejudices? It seems logical to affirm that to establish that a prejudice is not an ultimate one, it is necessary to find some justificatory reasons that, at the same time, deny the content of the prejudiced assertion – recognizing it as a mid-prejudice – and act as the basis for a different ethical theory – denying that it can be an *ultimate* prejudice –. Let's consider Singer's case. His line of reasoning goes on like: why should the interests of all sentient beings be considered at the same level? Because they all suffer. And why can only those who suffer have interests? Because experiencing something which is preferable should be maximized. In my view, this is the last assertion for which he does not give valid justificatory reasons, which is what I recognized as a prejudice. However, who tells us that this is not the ultimate prejudice admitted by Williams? This is not an ultimate prejudice at the moment in which justificatory reasons are found for showing that also those who do not suffer can have interests, and this becomes the justificatory reason for another ethical theory; no more, “humans and animals should be given the same moral considerability”, but “sentient and non-sentient beings should be given the same moral considerability”. Also for Williams' case, it is necessary to find justificatory reasons denying that “if you are a human, you must defend human interests” and that will constitute the basis for the ethical theory “if you are a human you can also defend the interest of non-sentient natural

---

<sup>98</sup> p. 130.

beings”.<sup>99</sup> Finding these reasons is what the *construes* part, that will be anticipated in the next session, should be about.<sup>100</sup>

#### 4. *Towards an unprejudiced ethical theory*

In the previous paragraphs, both Singer’s and Williams’ positions have been countered. Where to start, thus, for an ethical position which is not prejudiced? First, it should not contain the characteristics that have been previously recognized as prejudices. Thus, moral considerability should neither be limited to sentient beings, as in Singer, nor to humans, as in Williams, because those positions have been recognized as flawed by prejudice. Such an ethical thought as described should enlarge moral considerability to non-sentient beings and should be a non-anthropocentric position. A very first issue that could arise is to what extent non-sentience should be considered. Should moral considerability be given to all beings on Earth? To both organic and inorganic ones? Valid justificatory reasons should be provided to expand moral considerability also to non-sentient beings. Those same reasons will also be useful for recognizing that Singer’s and Williams’ assertions are not ultimate prejudices, as explained in the previous paragraph. On what could these reasons be based? Currently, I think that proposing an ontological basis to the ethical discourse could help in proposing some valid justificatory reasons. To justify giving moral considerability also to non-sentient natural beings, a relational ontological basis characterized by non-separation could be taken into account. These and many other issues should be further discussed to hopefully elaborate an unprejudiced ethical theory.

---

<sup>99</sup> Williams himself says that giving preeminent importance to humans, his second point, is not an ultimate prejudice. Precisely, he says: «[t]he word “speciesism” has been used for an attitude some regard as our ultimate prejudice, that in favor of humanity. It is more revealingly called “humanism,” and it is not a prejudice (B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, cit., p. 131)».

<sup>100</sup> In light of this extra level of problematization, it does not seem possible to say that Singer’s and Williams’ theories are invalid ethical theories. In fact, I have previously said that the considered ethical theories are not valid because a (mid-)prejudice is present, but, if that (mid-)prejudice was an ultimate prejudice, they could be valid ethical theories. If they were ultimate prejudices, Singer’s and Williams’ ethical theories could be valid because Williams’ definition of ethical theory admits ultimate prejudice. And, in the present work, I am not capable of showing that what I individuate as mid-prejudices are not ultimate prejudices. Anyway, this is an extra level of problematization with respect to my initial intent to demonstrate that Singer’s and Williams’ positions are assertions without justificatory reasons, and this remains valid on the basis of what demonstrated in the previous paragraphs.

## Bibliographical References

- Apostol, L., Rebeaga, O.L. and Miclea, M., *Psychological and socio-demographic predictors of attitudes toward animals*, in «Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences», 78, 2013, pp. 521-525 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.343>> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Barad, K., *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina 2007.
- Bendinger, T., Plunkett, N., *Measurement in pain medicine*, in «BJA Education», 16.9, 2016, pp. 310–315 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaed/mkw014>>.
- Bostock, D., *Plato's Phaedo*, OUP, Oxford 1986.
- Brennan, A., *Humanism, Racism and Speciesism*, in «Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology», 7.3, 2003 <[https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/7/3/article-p274\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/7/3/article-p274_3.xml)> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Colombo, E.S., Pelosi, A., Prato-Previde, E., *Empathy towards animals and belief in animal-human-continuity in Italian veterinary students*, in «Animal Welfare», 25, 2016 doi:10.7120/09627286.25.2.275 [accessed 05/09/22].
- Cragg, A., *Bernard Williams and the Nature of Moral Reflection*, in «Dialogue», 28.3, 1989, pp. 355-364 doi:10.1017/S0012217300015900 [accessed 05/09/22].
- De Grauw, J.C., Van Loon, J.M., *Systematic pain assessment in horses*, in «Vet J.», 209, 2016, pp. 14–22.
- Della Mirandola, P.G., Borghesi, F., Papio, M., Riva, M., *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.
- Descartes, R., Lindsay, A.D., Veitch J. (trans), *A discourse on method [and] Meditations on the first philosophy [and] Principles of philosophy*, Dent, London 1912.
- Descartes, R., Cottingham, J., Williams, B., *Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.
- Diamond, C., *Bernard Williams on the Human Prejudice*, in «Philosophical Investigations», 41.4, 2018 <10.1111/ph.in.12204> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Fritsch, M., *Taking Turns with the Earth. Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2018.
- Grudin, R., 'Humanism', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2022 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanism>> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Hernandez-Avalos, I., Mota-Rojas, D., Mora-Medina, P., Martínez-Burnes, J., Casas Alvarado, A., Verduzco-Mendoza, A., Lezama-García, K., Olmos-Hernandez, A., *Review of different methods used for clinical recognition and assessment of pain in dogs and cats*, in «International Journal of Veterinary Science and Medicine», 18.7(1), 2019, pp. 43-54 doi: 10.1080/23144599.2019.1680044 [accessed 05/09/22].
- Hills, A.M., *Empathy and belief in the mental experience of animals*, in «Anthrozoös», 8, 1995, pp. 132-142 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279395787156347>> [accessed 05/09/22].

- Holton, L., Pawson, P., Nolan, A. *et al.*, *Development of a behaviour-based scale to measure acute pain in dogs*, in «Vet Rec», 148, 2001, pp. 525–531.
- Knight, S., Vrij, A., Cherryman, J. and Nunukoosing, K., *Attitudes towards animals use and belief in animal mind*, in «Anthrozoös», 17.1, 2004, pp. 43-62 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279304786991945>> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Mauro, I., *A Conversation with Vandana Shiva - Quantum physics and our natural world*, online video recording, YouTube, 19 February 2013, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6otiqF\\_IUAc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6otiqF_IUAc)> [accessed 05/09/22].
- Nichols, J. H. (tr. and ed.), *Phaedrus*, Cornell University Press, New York 1998.
- Patterson, S., *Prejudice*, in L. Nolan (ed.), *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 604-607 doi:10.1017/CBO9780511894695.208 [accessed 05/09/22].
- Ross, W.D., *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, in R. McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Random House, New York 1941.
- Rowe, C., *Plato, Republic*, Penguin Books, New York 2012.
- Ryder, R.D., *Speciesism Again: the original leaflet*, in «Critical Society», 2, 2010 <<http://www.veganzetta.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Speciesism-Again-the-original-leaflet-Richard-Ryder.pdf>> [accessed 05/09/22].
- , *Experiments on Animals*, in S. R. Godlovitch, J. Harris (ed.), *Animals, Men and Morals*, Grove Press, Inc, New York 1971.
- Singer, P., *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals*, Thorsons Publishers Limited, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire 1983.
- , *Practical ethics*, 3rd ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.
- Spinoza, B., *The Ethics*, in E. Curley (trans. and ed.), *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and other works*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994.
- Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Routledge Classics, London and New York 2011.
- , *Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?*, in B. Williams, *Making Sense of humanity and other philosophical papers 1982 - 1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.
- , *The Human Prejudice*, in A.W. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006.
- Würbel, H., *Ethology applied to animal ethics*, in «Applied Animal Behaviour Science», 118, 2009, pp. 118-127 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2009.02.019>> [accessed 05/09/22].