

# Epistemology:

## *From the eyes of Utilitarianism*

HU1102: Philosophiae Group 1  
Instructor: Dr. Sanjit Chakraborty

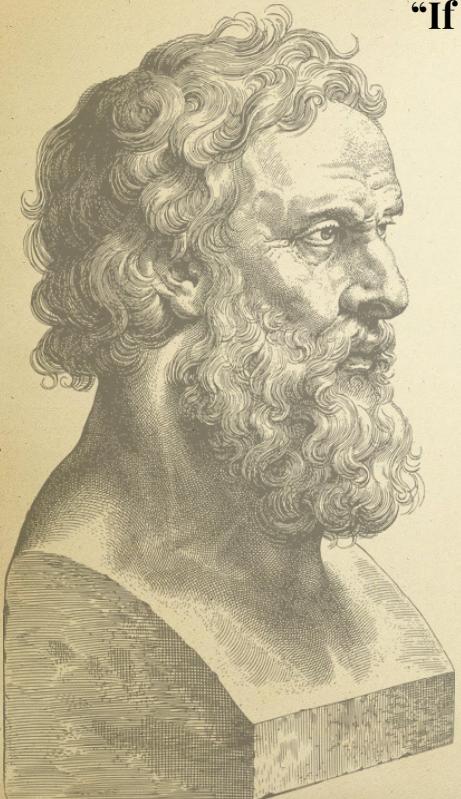
*Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Kolkata*

# Briefing Utilitarianism

Moral theories help us make the right decisions as responsible moral agents. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist moral theory that focuses on the consequences of our actions rather than our intents. If given a choice from A and B, utilitarianism urges to take the action which gives the **greater pleasure to the greater number**, minimizing pain.

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill were the behind-the-curtain for this new moralistic approach. Similar to Kantian ethics, they agree that a moral theory should apply equally to everyone. Where morality is concerned, utilitarians argue, as special as you are, you are no more special than anybody else. So, utilitarians suggest that we make moral decisions from the position of a benevolent, disinterested spectator (i.e., without any specific bias).

These concepts of utilitarianism are proven beneficial in various social scenarios, including poverty and animal rights.



**“If the Gods speak, they will surely use the the language of the Greeks.”**

~ Marcus Tullius Cicero

# Epistemology

Epistémē

Knowledge, Understanding

Logia

Science, Study

## Justified

Justification gives the reason behind the rationally admissible belief.

## True Belief

The belief being in accord with reality.

## Knowledge

Status of some fact being known.

# The Value of Knowledge: Epistemic Value

One obvious place of intersection between value theory and epistemology is in the comparatively recent resurrection of a problem from the *Meno*: namely, that of explaining why knowledge is (or seems!) more valuable than mere true belief. After all, as Plato pointed out, both knowledge about the location of Larissa and mere true belief about its location will get you to Larissa. Now, there can be multiple attempts to solutions, but it remains an open problem as there is no definitive answer to it. How, then, does the utilitarian epistemologist approach this problem? If the value problem is understood to be the question of why knowledge has more final value than mere true belief, the utilitarian's answer is immediate: knowledge does not have more final value than mere true belief, because both have exactly zero. To the classical utilitarian under consideration only states of welfare are of value; all other value is instrumental. But, Knowledge, Plato seems to suggest, is true belief that has been tied down so that it cannot easily escape. It is thus more valuable to us in the same way a valuable statue in an alarmed display case is more valuable than that same statue left unguarded among thieves.

# Continued ...

This answer is not satisfactory, though; as Timothy Williamson aptly put it, “surely [Plato] recognized that mere true beliefs can be held with dogmatic confidence, and knowledge lost through forgetting.” That is, Plato’s answer does not explain why knowledge is more valuable than a lucky true belief held dogmatically, since both are apt to stick around. It also fails to explain why knowledge we are about to forget is more valuable than mere true belief we are about to forget, given that both are about to disappear. Williamson says knowledge is more (instrumentally) valuable because the justification that comes with knowledge makes it more probable that the knower will keep the true belief when new doubts arise. John Kvavilashvili argues that Williamson’s answer is also unsatisfactory, however, for in many ways knowledge is significantly more fragile than the corresponding mere true belief. You merely need a defeater to lose the former—perhaps just thinking of skeptical scenarios will do!—while something must change your mind to lose the latter. But still, some philosophers are of the opinion that it is in the nature of knowledge to be more valuable than mere true belief.

# Introducing Utilitarian Epistemology:

To a classical utilitarian:

- There is no real epistemic value; only states of welfare are valuable.

To a utilitarian epistemologist:

- Epistemic values with potential to maximize welfare among people are considered valuable.
- Thus, epistemology, on the utilitarian picture, is like the study of finance. A utilitarian should view “epistemic value” in the way a financier views “financial value”.

Wait! I am a **utilitarian**.

What are these nonsense –

Huh! I only care about states of welfare of maximum number of people. I am not at all interested in these epistemic values *et cetera*.

# Utilitarian Epistemology: Making choices

- Deduction from true beliefs and facts are of high epistemic value
- Wishful thinking is of low epistemic value

I have a question.

What if the deduced belief does not bear the expected utility, and the wishfully thought one bears a utility ?



# Continued ...

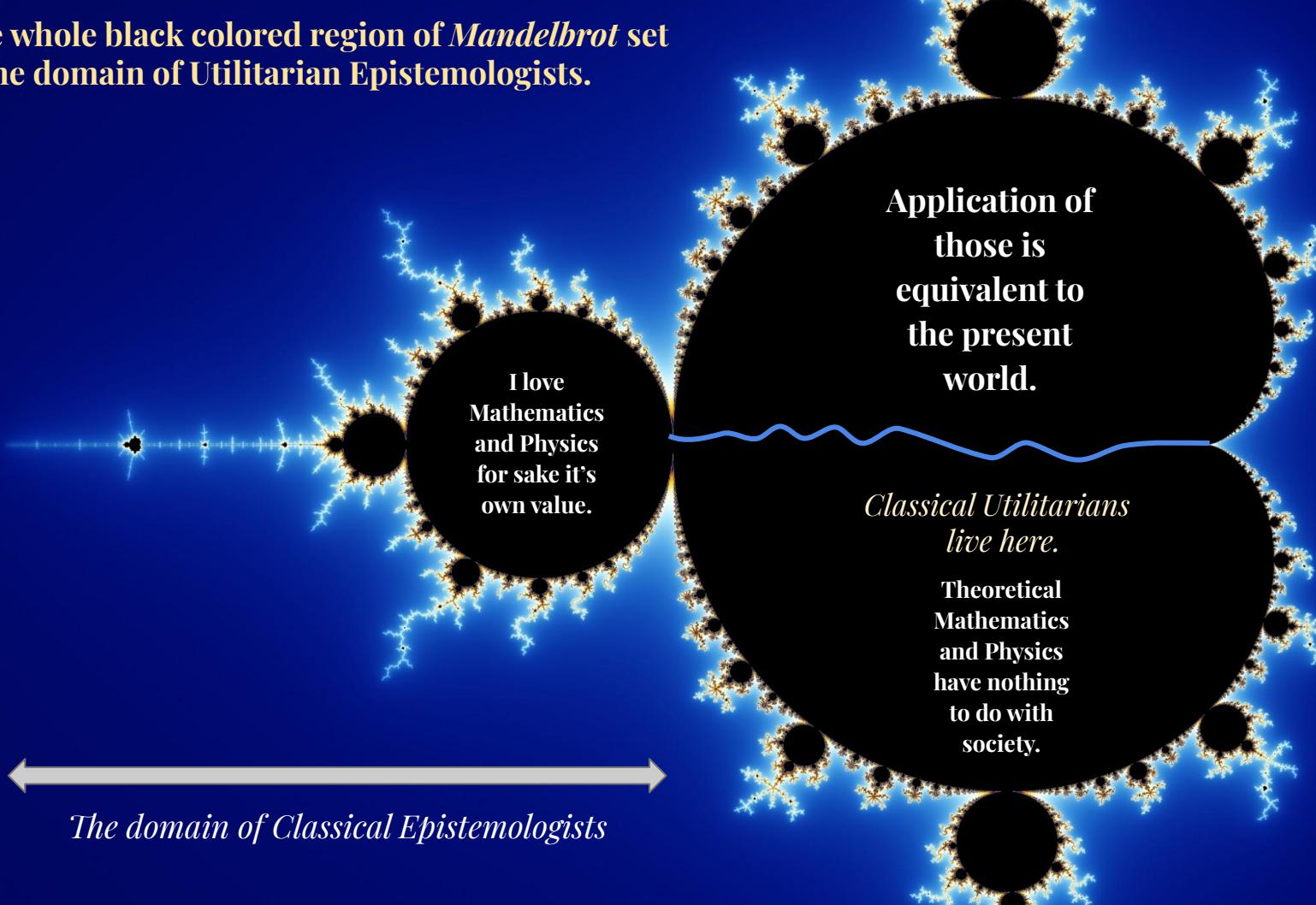
These epistemologists insist that to worry about the goodness of beliefs not ultimately contributing to their truth is to step outside epistemic bounds (For instance, existence of God). Steven Petersen says,

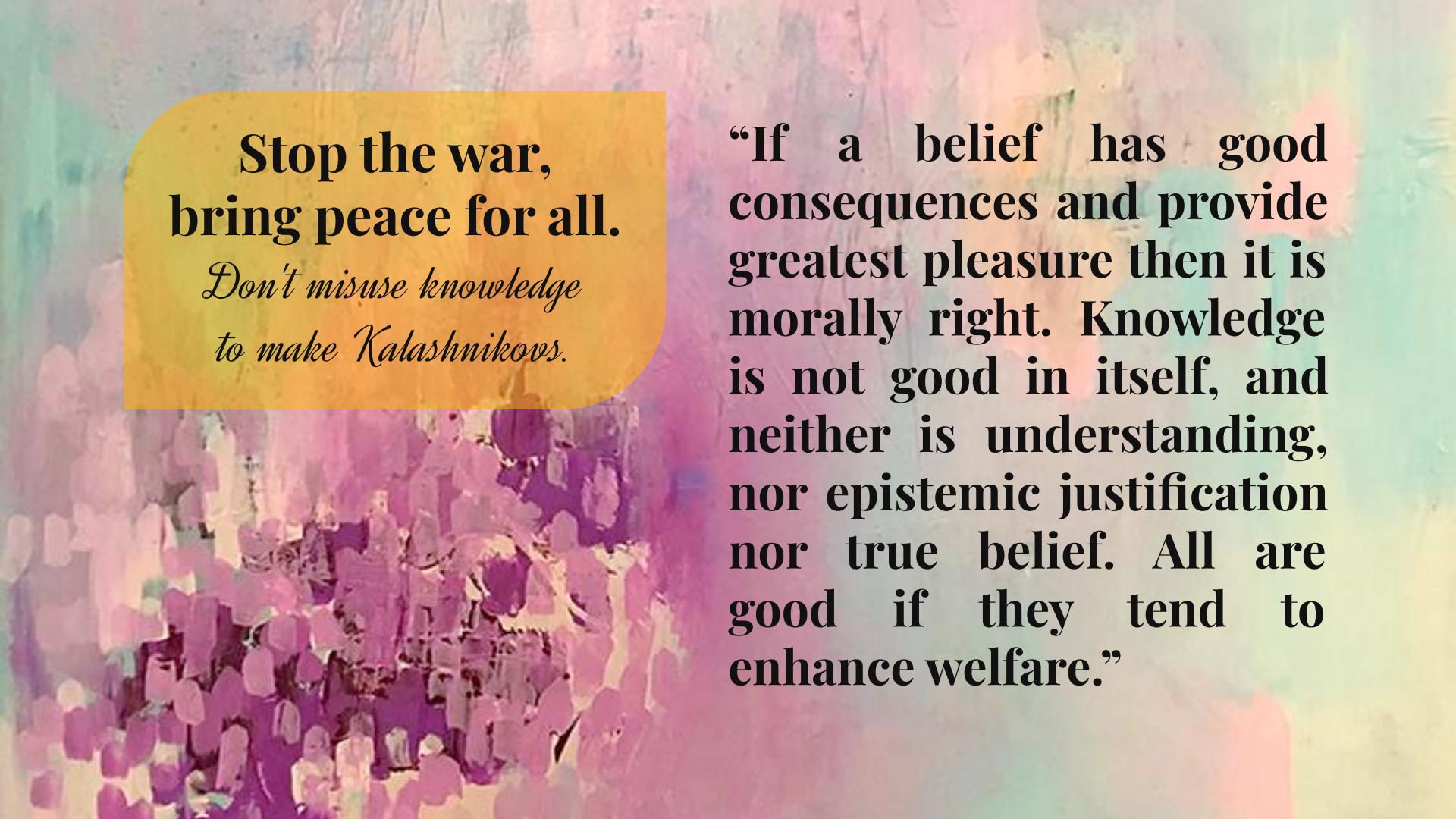
*Truth may or may not be the value fundamental to epistemology, who knows? Our point requires only that welfare alone is the fundamental value, the ultimate explainer of all other values. (numbers)*

In other words, determining the exact boundary of epistemology is not so urgent when, like finance, it is understood as the study of an important instrumental good, rather than an ultimate (and fairly mysterious) good in its own right.

But you might wonder, shouldn't the epistemologist simply study contributions to epistemic value, and leave questions about the nature of value to the ethicists? Predictably, our answer here is "no", for many central epistemic questions are inextricably bound with ethical ones. We suspect that is because, at its core, epistemology is the study of good (or right) thinking.

The whole black colored region of *Mandelbrot set*  
is the domain of Utilitarian Epistemologists.





**Stop the war,  
bring peace for all.**

*Don't misuse knowledge  
to make Kalashnikovs.*

**“If a belief has good consequences and provide greatest pleasure then it is morally right. Knowledge is not good in itself, and neither is understanding, nor epistemic justification nor true belief. All are good if they tend to enhance welfare.”**

# Bibliography

1. **Steve Petersen.** *Utilitarian Epistemology*. Springer Journals.  
DOI 10.1007/s11229-011-9887-7
2. **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.** *Epistemic Value*.  
<https://iep.utm.edu/ep-value/> Retrieved on March 12, 2022.
3. **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.** *Epistemology*.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/> Retrieved on  
March 11, 2022.

# Credits

Ishita Bhattacharya  
Adityavarsha AS

Priyanshu Mahato  
Kritika Margadarshini

Reshma Chowdhury  
Santosh Kumar Padhiali

Abhisruta Maity

Cristina Joseph

Presented on *March 16, 2022*