

Philosophy 133 (“Ethics in Science”)  
Spring 2008

**Kitcher on whether knowledge is always beneficial**

**Claim:** Knowledge is always good for me.

**Question:** What does it mean to say, “X is good for me”?

Analysis in terms of:

- My goals (in order of importance, with a sense of how to balance them)
- Available strategies for pursuing my goals.

(*One goal might be satisfying my curiosity.*)

Knowledge *could*:

- Expand my set of strategies.
- Show particular strategies won’t work.
- Show a goal isn’t valuable by undermining my justification for pursuing it.
- Show a goal we thought to be unattainable *is* attainable.
- Show a goal is unattainable.
- Show there is no basis for valuing a particular goal.

*Which of these outcomes are good? Which are bad?*

What contributes to our quality of life?

- Happiness (pleasure vs. pain)
- Fulfillment of aspirations
- Authenticity/autonomy/freedom to choose my goals
- Intrinsic character of my projects (are they worthwhile?)

**Claim:** Knowledge increases my chances of fulfilling my goals (giving me better strategies, a better idea of which goals are attainable, etc.).

**Objection:** My new goals might not be worthwhile, attaining them might not make me happy.

**Claim:** More knowledge increases autonomy.

**Objection:** If knowledge eliminates some of my choices, this decreases my autonomy. (And some bits of knowledge have no bearing on my autonomy.)

**Claim:** Transforming our values in the light of knowledge is progress, and in the long term will lead to greater happiness.

**Objection:** What about the short term? Do earlier generations bear the price of later generations’ happiness, and is this fair?