

Catherine Elgin, “The Epistemic Efficacy of Stupidity” (1988)

Epistemology Reading Group (Oct. 20, 2025)

Elgin begins by conditions for a JTB account of knowledge:

[J] – one cannot know that p if one's true belief that p is accidental

[T] – one cannot know that p if p is false however good one's grounds for p

[B] – one cannot know that p without being cognitively committed to p

Epistemologists agree about [T] and [B] but offer competing answers to [J]:

Internalism: “epistemically accessible to the knowing subject” (298)

Externalism: “necessarily connected to the fact that makes it true, or to facts from which its truth follows” (298)

Ultimately, Elgin thinks that either account will be unsatisfactory for making room for what she terms “cognitive excellences.” Here’s how she summarizes her main concern:

“Since qualities of mind like sensitivity, breadth, and logical acumen often interfere with the satisfaction of the requirements for knowledge, individuals deficient in such qualities have an epistemic edge. The quest for knowledge may then be furthered by the cultivation of obtuseness.” (297)

§2 considers two externalist accounts of epistemic justification:

Causal Theory of Knowledge

1. For a subject to know that p , his true belief that p must be caused by the fact that p or by facts from which it follows that p .
2. The causal connection must be lawlike, so that knowledge cannot result from a fortuitous commingling of circumstances.
3. Given the laws of nature and particular circumstances, a belief that p is a necessary consequence of the fact that p .

Reliabilist Theory of Knowledge

1. Knowledge depends on a belief's relation to truth in counterfactual as well as in actual circumstances.
2. A properly tethered belief is, roughly, one the subject would harbor if true and would not harbor if false.
3. The truth of a properly tethered belief is non-accidental.
 - ⇒ “Absolute” reliabilism: infallibly discriminate that p .
 - ⇒ “Moderate” reliabilism: infallibly discriminate that p relative to a restricted scope of relevant counterfactuals.

Elgin poses a series of cases that pose problems for externalists:

WINE – Holmes and Watson¹ are sharing a Bordeaux. The wine stimulates the appropriate nerve endings and brings about the same neurological connections in both, which causes both men to believe they are drinking Bordeaux.

Causal: both Holmes and Watson know that they are drinking a Bordeaux.

Problem: Watson cannot discriminate between different wines, whereas Holmes can. Intuitively, Holmes knows in a way that Watson does not. But if the only evaluation is the chain of causation, then there is nothing to separate how the justification of their beliefs.

Absolute Reliabilist: Neither Watson nor Holmes know they are drinking Bordeaux (*cannot infallibly discriminate Bordeaux*).

Moderate Reliabilist: Whether Watson or Holmes knows is a matter of the relevant scope of counterfactuals.

Problem: Without proper criteria, it is hard to avoid the appearance of begging the question.

ROTGUT – Holmes and Watson are sharing a wine. Watson reliably classifies wines as in only three categories: rotgut, table wine and vintage stuff. Holmes reliably classifies wines by their proper type. Holmes believes he's drinking a rotgut, and Watson believes he's drinking a Margaux.

Elgin takes *ROTGUT* to make the point that “as we refine our conceptual schemes, we increase our chances of error” (301). Consider how this point applies to Watson and Holmes:

Holmes: On a reliabilist theory, Holmes does not know. The more delicate our distinctions, the more easily circumstances conspire to confound judgment.

On a causal theory, Holmes does not know. Although he strongly suspects that he is imbibing a Margaux, he can't bring himself fully to believe it. And without belief, there is no knowledge.

Watson: According to both reliabilist and causal theories, Watson knows he's drinking rotgut. Since belief is required for knowledge, Watson knows something about their shared experience that Holmes does not.

Problem: Holmes, with his more sensitive perceptual and conceptual categories, seems to be in a position to know a good deal more than Watson.

Elgin's diagnosis of externalism:

- ⇒ Favors the employment of crude categories; refinements invite error and unreliability.
- ⇒ Favors obliviousness to evidence as there is no epistemic advantage to being more aware.
- ⇒ The reflective subject is bound to fail; for unless he is willing to believe, he is in no position to know. He neither believes what is true nor disbelieves what is false; lacking sufficient evidence, he suspends judgment.

¹ In all cases, Holmes is to be construed as cognitively superior and Watson inferior.

§3-4 consider two internalist accounts of epistemic justification:

Individualist Internalism

1. The justification for a hypothesis is a matter of its coherence with a system of claims the subject already accepts.
2. A statement coheres with a system if its acceptance is more reasonable relative to that system than is the acceptance of any competing claim.
3. Justification is restricted to the system that would result when the personal acceptance system is purged of all possible errors.

Social Internalism

1. An epistemic community decides the requisite information, inferences, and knowledge that normal members of the community normally could meet.
2. Epistemic resources count as accessible if they are available to normal members of the community, even if an individual's situation make them unavailable to him.
3. A belief is justified or unjustified relative to the standards of a specific epistemic community.

Elgin poses the following case as a problem for individualist internalism:

BIRD – Upon sighting a bird, Holmes and Watson form the belief that it is a superb starling. Watson's relevant background beliefs are narrow: he knows the characteristic markings of superb starlings but not their native habitat. Holmes' relevant background beliefs are wider: he knows their markings and native habitat. Given that it is implausible that a bird indigenous to Africa would be found in England, Holmes does not conclude that the bird is not a starling whereas Watson believes the bird is a starling.

Elgin applies the same point as made about *ROTGUT* to *BIRD*:

Watson: Because his background beliefs are narrow and his thoughts are very coarse-grained (“x is a bird”), Watson is justified in his beliefs.

Problem: The only reason that Watson is justified in his belief is because he is ignorant, which suggests that ignorance has an epistemic benefit.

Holmes: Holmes is not justified in accepting any identification because of the wide scope of his background beliefs. Further, individual coherence creates a higher bar to achieve the same thing that Watson accomplishes with a lower bar.

Problem: Lack the resources to discriminate between significant and insignificant beliefs.

Elgin poses the following case as a problem for social internalism:

PRIME MINISTER – Recent fluctuations in grain prices discredit the claim that the Prime Minister lied about the prospects for peace. Normal members of the community lack the acumen to recognize the relevance of grain prices to the Prime Minister's statement, and to draw the proper inference from them. Holmes, being much smarter than the rest of the community, realizes that the Prime Minister has lied.

PRIME MINISTER gives us the same general problem as *BIRD*:

Community: Since normal members of the community are not bound to consider those indicators, their justification is intact. So they know that the Prime Minister lied.

Problem: We know that the Prime Minister lied – why should the epistemic standards of the community have any bearing on the fact of the matter?

Holmes: Realizes that the evidence of the grain prices discredits the community's justification and cannot consider himself justified in believing the Prime Minister lied. So, being rational, he does not believe it.

Problem: Because he is smarter than others, he cannot ignore truths merely because others are incapable of it. Holmes thus fails to know, although his intellectual inferiors succeed.

Elgin's diagnosis of internalism:

- ⇒ *Individual internalism* favors the employment of crude categories, where differences are stark and instantiation is easily verified.
- ⇒ *Social internalism* cannot account for individuals whose cognitive capacities exceed their community's norms, so these individuals will lack justification for their beliefs
- ⇒ *Internalism as a whole* discourages additional information and greater abilities because they produce no epistemic advantage and have the capacity to undermine the justification a more minimal system supplies.

Elgin concludes with a brief summary of the larger argument of the paper and some future themes to explore regarding the nature of epistemic value and cognitive accomplishment.

What her diagnoses do not argue:

- ⇒ A conclusive counterexample to all cases in which it seems reasonable to believe that Watson knows more than Holmes (cf. Sosa on animal knowledge).
- ⇒ Providing motivation to add another condition for knowledge; idealized epistemology grants more room to skepticism.

What her diagnoses do argue:

- ⇒ "Knowledge, as contemporary theories conceive it, is not and ought not be our overriding cognitive objective. For to treat it as such is to devalue cognitive excellences like conceptual and perceptual sensitivity, logical acumen, breadth and depth of understanding, and the capacity to distinguish important from trivial truths. Even when Watson knows more than Holmes, he does not appear to be cognitively better off." (310)
- ⇒ "This suggests that it is unwise to restrict epistemology to the study of what contemporary theories count as knowledge. What is wanted is a wide-ranging study of cognitive excellences of all sorts, and of the ways they contribute to or interfere with one another's realization." (310)