Catherine Z. Elgin, “The Epistemic Efficacy of Stupidity”

Elgin holds the Professorship for Philosophy of Education at Harvard University, and has wide-ranging research interests including epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language. According to her CV, she did her undergraduate work at Vassar College, and wrote her dissertation at Brandeis University in the 1970's.

The title of the paper may need a bit of explanation, as it's meant to be ironic. The word “efficacy” means roughly “tendency to cause or accomplish something,” and so “epistemic efficacy” means something like “tendency to bring about knowledge.” Putting that all together, the title suggests that stupidity tends to bring about knowledge, which would be absurd. Of course, once you’ve read the abstract you'll see that Elgin doesn’t think that stupidity really does this. Rather, she thinks that’s the outrageous consequence of the two most popular philosophical approaches to justification. Because these approaches have this as a consequence, she is in effect arguing that something has gone horribly wrong.

Notes:

- p. 297: Internalist and externalist theories are the two primary philosophical views about where justification comes from. They are competitors. According to internalism, your justification for some belief that p comes from your mental states, like evidence you’re aware of or other beliefs you have. And according to externalism, your justification for some belief that p comes from something beyond your internal states, like being a reliable judge of p-type things or having the right causal connection to the truth.

- p. 297: To say that a consequence is untoward is to say that it's unwelcome.

- p. 297: Causal theories and reliabilist theories are versions of externalism, while coherence theories are versions of internalism. The basic idea behind coherentism is that your belief that p is justified only if it is supported by, and doesn’t contradict, other beliefs that you have.

- p. 298: Elgin’s choice to talk about tethers instead of justification is designed to avoid an old criticism of externalism. People who are internalists (meaning they think that a belief is justified only if the person is in the right mental state) have insisted that the word “justification” refers only to the evidence a subject could herself provide for her belief. That objection isn’t important for our purposes, so you can treat Elgin’s talk of tethers as equivalent to our talk of justification.

- p. 299: By “inferential knowledge”, Elgin means the sorts of things we come to know just by seeing that they follow from something else we know, like in the inference either Alice or Bill will go to the party, and Bill isn’t going, so Alice must be going. The citation here is to Alvin Goldman, the inventor of the causal theory.
• p. 299: It will become clear shortly that Elgin is using Watson as a less intelligent foil for the smart, sophisticated, and perceptive Holmes.

• p. 299: An oenophile (pronounced “EENO-file”) is a wine connoisseur.

• pp. 299-300: To dismiss the chain of neurological events as “anomalous” would be to say that it wasn’t an instance of a law-like connection, which would mean that Watson doesn’t actually know it’s a Bordeaux according to the causal theory. Elgin is saying that the causal theorist can’t take this way out of the puzzle.

• p. 300: Counterfactual circumstances are those that would have come about if things went differently than that actually do—for instance, if you didn’t have to read this Elgin paper, you would be reading blogs instead. Sentences like this one are called counterfactuals or subjunctive conditionals. Philosophers like to say that such a counter-to-fact situation represents a possible world.

• p. 300: The citations here are to Robert Nozick and Fred Dretske, who are defenders of reliabilism, in case that’s not already clear.

• p. 300: Relevant alternatives are ones that we have reason to believe might actually be the case. Descartes’s demon hypothesis is an example of an irrelevant alternative because he has absolutely no reason to think there really is a demon tricking him.

• p. 302: To confute is show that some person or view is wrong. The word is basically a synonym of “refute”, but the “con” prefix gives it even stronger emphasis.

• p. 305: As readers of Arthur Conan Doyle will recall, Baker Street is where Holmes and Watson reside in London.

• p. 305: The reference here is to Carl Ginet, who taught at Cornell for many years and is still a regular fixture of the philosophy scene in Ithaca.

• p. 305: To call something otiose is to say that it isn’t useful.

• p. 305: By “defeaters” Elgin means bits of evidence that could prevent his belief that he sees a superb starling from cohering with his system.

• p. 308: Gilbert Harman is a philosopher at Princeton.

• p. 308: The other reference here is to Stewart Cohen, who was a colleague of Goldman’s at Arizona for a time.

• p. 309: By “arcane”, Elgin means “obscure” or “esoteric”.

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Questions to think about:

1. Do you think that justification is a matter of the mental state you’re in, or a matter of the process that formed your belief?

2. Which would you rather give up: the directive to believe true things, or the possibility of knowledge altogether?

3. Should we try to improve on internalism or externalism? How?

4. Is it better to be a skeptic, or to allow for other epistemic goals? If other goals, what kinds?