ABSTRACT. I show that it follows from both externalist and internalist theories that stupid people may be in a better position to know than smart ones. This untoward consequence results from taking our epistemic goal to be accepting as many truths as possible and rejecting as many falsehoods as possible, combined with a recognition that the standard for acceptability cannot be set too high, else scepticism will prevail. After showing how causal, reliabilist, and coherentist theories devalue intelligence, I suggest that knowledge, as contemporary theories construe it, is not a particularly valuable cognitive achievement, and that we would do well to reopen epistemology to the study of cognitive excellences of all sorts.

Socrates maintained that he was the wisest of men in that he alone knew that he knew nothing. Although his avowal is typically taken to be ironic, he may have been telling the truth. For currently popular theories of knowledge have the surprising consequence that stupidity can enhance, and intelligence diminish, one’s prospects for knowledge. So if any of these theories is correct, Socrates may have known less than others precisely because he was wiser than they.

I will show that an unwitting bias in favor of stupidity is characteristic of both internalist and externalist theories of knowledge. It derives from the shared convictions that (a) our epistemic goal is to accept (or believe) a sentence if it is true and reject (or disbelieve) it if it is false, and (b) the standard for acceptability cannot be set too high, else scepticism will prevail. The epistemic inutility of intelligence that follows is not the skeptic’s fatalistic conclusion that since no one knows anything, dullards are no worse off than the rest. It is the more disconcerting result that 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.

It would be tedious to demonstrate that this follows from all current theories of knowledge. So I have chosen to focus on four – two externalist and two internalist. They represent dominant strains in contemporary epistemological theorizing. And the difficulties I find...
are not difficulties in detail. So if all four find cognitive deficiencies conducive to knowledge, there will be reason to suspect that a commitment to the epistemic efficacy of stupidity is endemic to current epistemology. Toward the end of my paper I consider what to make of this finding.

1.
Contemporary epistemologists agree on this much at least: however good one’s grounds for p, one cannot know that p if p is false; knowledge then requires truth. Moreover, one cannot know that p without being cognitively committed to p; knowledge also requires belief or acceptance. And one cannot know that p if one’s true belief that p is accidental; so knowledge requires a tether.

Internalists take the tether to be epistemic. Knowledge, they maintain, is tied down by justification that is epistemically accessible to the knowing subject. Disagreements among them concern the criteria for epistemic accessibility and the range of accessible information the subject need take into account. So they differ over, e.g., the epistemic status of unacknowledged implications of things one explicitly knows, or of undermining evidence one does not, but could, possess.

Externalists take the tether to be metaphysical. For a true belief to amount to knowledge, they contend, it must be necessarily connected to the fact that makes it true, or to facts from which its truth follows. They differ over the type of necessity required, but agree that it need not be within the subject’s ken. An individual can know that p even if he is unaware that his belief that p is appropriately related to the facts. Some take the metaphysical tether, known or unknown, to constitute the justification for a belief, thereby conceding that justification may be epistemically inaccessible. Others follow internalism in requiring justification to be epistemically accessible, but deny that justification is integral to or necessary for knowledge. To avoid confusion, I will speak of external tethers, leaving it open whether a belief’s tether provides its justification.

2.
Causal theories of knowledge maintain that for a subject to know that p, his true belief that p must be caused by the fact that p or by facts