ABSTRACT. Goodman and Elgin have recommended a reconception of philosophy. A central part of their recommendation is to replace knowledge by understanding. According to Elgin, some important internalist and externalist theories of knowledge favor a sort of undesirable cognitive minimalism. Against Elgin I try to show how the challenge of cognitive minimalism can be met. Goodman and Elgin claim that defeat and confusion are built into the concept of knowledge. They demand either its revision or its replacement or its supplement. I show that these are three very different options. While agreeing with the view that there may be good reasons for some revisions and supplements, I strongly disagree with Elgin and Goodman’s replacement thesis.

In their latest joint book Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin recommend a reconception of philosophy. Perhaps the most central part of their proposal consists of three important reconceptions in philosophy. According to Elgin and Goodman, the notions of truth, certainty, and knowledge, which are commonly taken as key concepts in philosophy, should be replaced by the concepts of rightness, adoption, and understanding. In my remarks I will focus on knowledge and understanding. I will especially concentrate on Elgin’s reasons for the dismissal of the notion of knowledge in Chapter IX, ‘The Epistemic Efficacy of Stupidity’.¹

For many traditional and contemporary epistemologists the fundamental notion of knowledge is propositional knowledge. An analysis of knowledge is widely understood as laying down necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that p. To a large extent it is accepted that such an account includes, first, the truth of p, second, the belief that p, and, third, some further condition C which is specified in different ways by internalists and externalists.

In its broadest formulation, internalism is the view that the knowing subject must have some kind of awareness of the fulfilment of the third condition. What justifies our beliefs must be something that is internal and epistemically accessible to us. Of course, not everything that is internal to us will be regarded as a possible justifier by an internalist.
Physiological processes, to which we have no access, are not suitable candidates.

Externalism can be described by a negative and by a positive thesis. Its negative thesis consists in the denial that we need any internalist requirement on true belief. Its positive thesis claims that some naturalistic relationship to the external world accounting for the truth of our beliefs is sufficient to convert true belief into knowledge. We need not have any idea of that relationship. It is not our conception of how we are related to a fact that yields knowledge but simply our being so related to it.

Elgin's main thesis is that currently popular externalist and internalist theories of knowledge "have the surprising consequence that stupidity can enhance, and intelligence diminish, one's prospects for knowledge". The claim is that additional information and greater cognitive abilities prevent intelligent people from knowledge.

To make the discussion more vivid, Elgin introduces the well-known, smart detective Holmes and his much more simple-minded colleague Watson. Compared with Watson, Holmes has a larger and more refined category system at his disposal and is able to take more evidence into account. But according to Elgin, these cognitive excellences produce no epistemic advantage for Holmes if they are measured along the lines of four different explications of knowledge which all favor a sort of cognitive minimalism.

To defend her diagnosis, Elgin has chosen two internalist and two externalist accounts. From the internalist camp she discusses Lehrer's individualistic coherence theory and Harman's social coherence theory; from the externalist camp she deals with Goldman's early causal account and with a version of reliabilism which she ascribes to Dretske and Nozick.

In her first example Elgin describes Holmes as an oenophile, whereas Watson lacks the oenophile's sensitivity to distinctions among wines. Now the two friends share a bottle of Bordeaux. Do they both know what they are drinking?

According to early versions of causal theories, the answer is yes. If for a subject to know that \( p \) his true belief that \( p \) must be caused by the fact that \( p \), then they both know that they are drinking a Bordeaux. Of course, this result is highly counterintuitive, for Watson's inability to distinguish a Muscatel from a Bordeaux is not reflected in the ascription of knowledge to him.