

CHECKING AGAIN*

Jane Friedman | jane.friedman@nyu.edu

09 | 2019

1 INTRODUCTION

You cook your breakfast and turn off the stove. You eat and get ready for work, but as you're about to walk out the door you start to wonder whether you in fact turned the stove off. You're pretty sure you did, but just to be safe you have a quick look at the stove dial before you leave the house. You can see that it's in the off position and so you head off. A moment later though you start to worry about whether the stove is really off – was the dial really in the off position? You cast another glance at the dial, you see it's in the off position and you leave the house. But a few moments after that you start to wonder again about whether the stove is really off – couldn't the dial be broken? – and you go back in the house and this time check the temperature of the burner – it's cold. You leave the house again. But then you start to worry again about whether it's off – did you put your hand close enough to the burner? – and so you call your neighbour and ask them to go over and check. They do and report that, yes, your stove is off. But a few moments later you get worried again – is the neighbour trustworthy? You call your friend and ask them to go check. And this keeps going.

This sort of incessant checking and re-checking is not a model of rationality: it looks like a serious misuse of time and energy and might even be pathological. Is it epistemically acceptable behaviour though?

It's not clear. It certainly doesn't feel as though you're thriving epistemically when you keep checking and re-checking on the stove. That said, it's hard to say exactly why incessant checking should be epistemically (rather than, say, practically) problematic. In the story I just told, you're getting more and more information about whether your stove off. Isn't having more evidence on some matter better than having less, and so getting more evidence always acceptable

*Please cite published version: Friedman, J. (2019), CHECKING AGAIN. *Philosophical Issues* 29: 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phis.12141>.

(and even laudable) from the perspective of epistemology?¹ And surely some re-checking is great epistemic practice: even if the doctors know that it's your right arm they have to amputate, you're still hoping that they check your chart before they start the operation. So, in the end, is there anything wrong – from a purely epistemic perspective – with checking again and again and again?

I think there is. In this paper, I want to explore at least some of what makes incessant checking epistemically problematic.² The arguments to come have broader epistemic implications as well. In what follows I'll discuss suspension of judgment, epistemic justification, the permissivism/uniqueness debate, and the norms of inquiry in general. On this last item: part of what will emerge in the discussion is that some of the cases in which checking again is epistemically problematic are cases in which subjects stand to gain in evidence or epistemic standing by performing that check. In these cases, even though further inquiry could improve subjects' epistemic situations, I'm going to argue that there are serious problems – epistemic ones – with inquiring further.

Incessant checkers may have a wide range of motivations, but their possible epistemic trajectories are more limited. In particular, as an incessant checker runs through their checks, their epistemic position with respect to their answer is either going to improve or it's not. The sort of case in which the checker's epistemic position keeps improving strikes me as the most interesting and the most puzzling (as I already wondered: how could we go epistemically wrong by improving our epistemic situation?), and it's the one I'm going to spend the most time exploring. I'll make a few brief comments about the sorts of cases in which a checker's epistemic circumstances are failing to improve as well.

There is a certain kind of “epistemic purist” who might want to complain that some of the questions I have been asking here are misguided. This purist says: “Epistemic evaluations are reserved for doxastic attitudes and only doxastic attitudes and track something about the extent to which those attitudes fit or are sensitive to the evidence the subject has at a given time. Questions about whether we should or may check again, or gather more evidence, or en-

¹Good (1967) argued that, in expectation at least, one cannot do worse by gathering more evidence before acting. And some have argued that an epistemic analogue of this is true as well: that gathering more evidence cannot reduce the (e.g.) expected accuracy of one's beliefs. For instance, see Horwich (1982), Maher (1990), Oddie (1997) and Fallis (2007).

²While I am going to be talking about incessant checking, I want to distinguish that from the sort of compulsive checking associated with some kinds of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). In this paper, I want to be thinking about re-checking that isn't part of a genuine disorder.

gage in further inquiry are simply extra-epistemic". Perhaps we can find this sort of purism in some of Tom Kelly's work, e.g., Kelly (2007) and Kelly (2008). I am not an epistemic purist, and I think the questions I've been asking so far make good sense. Most of what's to come though does not hang on accepting the sort of "impure" epistemology I favour. The epistemic flaws I am about to attribute to the incessant checker are completely standard epistemic flaws and will count as such even for the purist.

2 GROUNDWORK

Incessant checking is excessive. I take it that this is roughly a claim about its being practically wasteful. Whatever the epistemic benefits, the practical costs are too high to make all that checking and re-checking appropriate. This is a subtle claim about the interplay between potential epistemic gains and the practical costs that come with making those gains. While I think it's both interesting and important to think about this interplay, that's not my plan in this paper. I want to focus just on epistemic issues here. And while I'm going to pick out one way in which incessant checking goes epistemically wrong, I don't mean to say that this is the only way it could go epistemically wrong.³ What I do mean to say is that incessant checkers will typically violate some (often fairly central) epistemic norms.⁴

Now a few points to set up the discussion. First, checking is inquiring. Sometimes we "check" in a thinner sense – we have the habit of jiggling the lock a few extra times or tapping our pockets when something important is in there. In some of these cases, the behaviour is more like a tic than a genuine investigation. I'm interested in the cases that involve genuine inquiry and investigation. My checkers are really trying to collect more information and are not just performing certain habitual movements or looking at the stove for any number of other (non-epistemic) reasons. I take it that typical double-checkers and triple-checkers (etc.) are genuine inquirers.

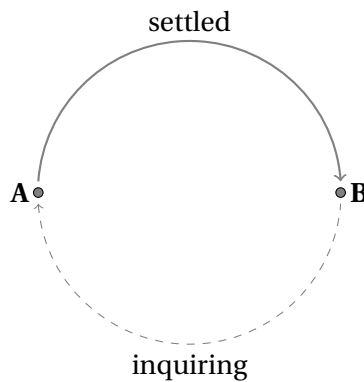
³For instance, Buchak (2010) highlights some (plausibly epistemic) risks of further tests or checks. And perhaps endless focus on one question or issue is wasteful in a properly epistemic sense, e.g., it prevents us from making other sorts of epistemic progress.

⁴Throughout the paper I will use expressions like "epistemic flaws", "going epistemically wrong", and "epistemically problematic" to describe the incessant checker and their incessant checking. These are just meant to serve as generic ways of saying that something is epistemically not OK. When the time comes, I will of course be much more precise about where this lack of OK-ness lies.

Second, often we start inquiring from a position of ignorance and neutrality. I don't know where the dog went, so I check the yard. But when we double-check or triple-check (etc.), we "re-check". If I have no idea where my passport is, then fishing around in my bag can count as my checking whether my passport is in my bag, but it won't count as my double-checking whether my passport is in my bag. To double-check whether my passport is in my bag, I need to already think that that's where the passport is. Checks are inquiries, and re-checks are inquiries into matters that re-checkers have already settled.⁵

With these two points in mind we can see the general form that a cycle of repeated re-checking takes. A re-checker starts settled with respect to a question *Q* (e.g., you turned the stove off after breakfast and at that point formed the belief that the stove was off, settling the question, 'Is the stove off?'). At that point they know *Q* or at least believe an answer to *Q* (It's off). Then, soon after, they open *Q* again (Is it off?) and collect more evidence on the matter (e.g., look at the dial). Then they settle the question again as a result of the check (It's off). Then, soon after that, they re-open the question again (Is it off?) and do another test (e.g., look at the dial again or check the burner). Then they re-settle again (It's off). And so on. I'm going to call this sort of extended cycle of re-checking '*m*-checking' (where '*m*' is some number). I've also called it 'incessant checking', although of course it does stop at some point.

Here is a simple representation of the cycle of incessant checking:



RE-CHECKING CYCLE

⁵My use of 're-check' may be slightly misleading then. It may seem to imply that the relevant subjects have already checked or inquired, but that needn't be the case here. What matters is that they have already settled the relevant question, whether by having inquired or by way of some other (less intentional) method, e.g., perception.

At point **A**, a subject *S* settles on some answer to *Q*, *p*. Along the top arc of the circle, *Q* continues to be settled for *S*. But then doubt creeps in, and *S* worries about whether *p* really is the right answer to *Q*. At point **B**, *S* opens *Q* up for inquiry (again), performs some test or check along the bottom arc, and then settles on *p* (again) at point **A**. And this keeps going for some number of revolutions.

One thing worth noting here is that the incessant checker I just described and the one I'm going to be discussing throughout this paper is one who keeps asking the same question and going back to the same answer. This seems to me the right way to think about incessant checking. Of course, when you think the stove is off and go to double-check, you could end up coming to think it's on rather than off. It seems to me though that once you switch answers the re-checking counter resets so that the next check is a double-check on the new answer (rather than a triple-check).⁶ Since this issue isn't all that important for us in this paper I'm not going to do much to defend the restriction to this sort of question and answer consistency. The incessant checkers we're going to be thinking about keep asking the same question (Is the stove off?) and settling back on the same answer (It's off!).⁷

What does "settling a question" amount to? I've already given some indication. Earlier I said that a check can only count as a re-check if you're trying to confirm an answer you already think is right. This is a fairly minimal demand: a subject has settled a question (for themselves) so long as they believe some answer to that question. Of course knowing the answer is typically better than merely believing it, but I don't think it's necessary for settling in the sense at issue now. So we can say: subjects who have settled a question (at least) believe some answer to that question. What about "opening a question"? We can

⁶In fact, perhaps the best way to think of the object of a re-check is not as a question but as a 'focused question' or a question-proposition pair, e.g., $\langle Q, p \rangle$. In re-checking we re-ask a question in order to check whether the answer we already have is the right one.

⁷One more related point that needs tidying. In most of the cases I've mentioned so far (and will discuss throughout) there's a suppressed temporal element to the questions and answers that might make it that strictly speaking checkers aren't quite asking the same questions over and over, and coming back to the same answers over and over. Each time that you ask whether the stove is off, the question you're asking is whether the stove is off now or at t_n , which is a slightly different question than the one you asked earlier (and the same goes mutatis mutandis for the answers you re-settle on). If I were speaking strictly, I would be talking about temporal counterparts of the questions and answers, rather than using the language of identity. I hope the reader will forgive the slack speech. Worth noting: I don't think cases of re-checking need to have this temporal feature, e.g., I can re-check on whether my flight leaves tomorrow at 9:00pm or who I invited to the party or how to say 'bird' in French, etc.

postpone that discussion until section 4.

In the argument to come, I'm going to help myself the notion of a subject's 'epistemic position' or 'epistemic circumstances' or 'epistemic standing' (I use all of these interchangeably). My thought is that for any proposition p that a subject can grasp at a time we can talk about that subject's epistemic standing with respect to p at that time. This isn't a matter of whether they believe p or not (in the binary or degreed sense), but rather a matter of something like the strength of their evidence for p , or the strength of their epistemic justification for believing p .^{8,9}

With this background in place, we can partition the cases of m -checking into two kinds. With each revolution around the circle above (from **A** back to **A**) either the checker's epistemic position with respect to their answer will improve, e.g., they'll get more evidence for their answer, or it won't. And then we can mark an analogous distinction with respect to the repeating cycle of re-checking: as the number of revolutions is mounting, a checker's epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer are going to be ultimately improving or they will not be. As I've said, my main focus here will be on the sorts of cases in which a re-checker's epistemic position is ultimately improving, but I'll start by saying a very little bit about the other sorts of cases.

3 INCESSANT CHECKING: EPISTEMIC POSITION NOT ULTIMATELY IMPROVING

A checker's epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer will not ultimately improve if those epistemic circumstances either: (a) ultimately deteriorate, or (b) stay largely stable in the long-run, neither improving nor deteriorating.

A checker's epistemic position can remain largely stable in the long-run if it simply doesn't change at all. In this sort of case although more and more checks are being performed, nothing at all is happening to the checker's epis-

⁸In fact, if the reader feels uncomfortable with this sort of talk of subjects' epistemic circumstances or positions with respect to p , they should feel free to just cash that out entirely in terms of the strength of subjects' evidence for/against p or the strength of their justification for believing p . I prefer the more neutral way of talking myself since it leaves open questions about which factors determine one's epistemic position, but nothing of significance hangs on it here.

⁹Whenever I talk about epistemic justification in this paper I mean propositional or prospective epistemic justification.

temic standing with respect to their answer. Long-term stability can take a different form as well: a checker can end up in much the same epistemic position in which they began, if whatever change there is is offset by some change in the other direction, i.e., if for every epistemic gain there's a (roughly equal) epistemic loss (and vice versa). Where the first sort of stable checker's epistemic trajectory as they run through their checks is flat, this second sort's is wavy, with epistemic gains offset by losses and losses by gains. As much as there is to say about these kinds of stable checkers, for the purposes of this discussion I'm going to leave them aside. I hope these sorts of trajectories strike the reader as interesting but also epistemically worrying (e.g., what is going on such that a checker keeps performing test after test with no change in epistemic standing at all?).¹⁰

I do want to say something quickly about the checker whose epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer are ultimately deteriorating (call this character the 'sinking checker'). The sinking checker thinks (e.g.) the stove is off (p), but as they run through their checks their epistemic standing with respect to p is getting worse and worse (perhaps they get evidence that it's on, rather than off at each check). Even if this sinking checker started in the sort of epistemic position that justified their believing p , if that epistemic position deteriorates enough, it will no longer be able to justify believing p . But I've argued that one stage of m -checking involves a shift back to belief in one's answer post-check (i.e., at point **A** on our circle). That means that the sinking checker's belief that the stove is off will eventually (after some number of revolutions) be unjustified.¹¹ So, incessant checking is epistemically problematic in this sort of case since it involves m -checkers forming and having beliefs without justification.

¹⁰It's worth quickly pointing out that at least some theories of genuinely pathological, OCD-related checking seem to put these sorts of pathological checkers on wavy trajectories. These compulsive checkers can spend hours checking whether a switch is off or a dial in some position over and over again. One sort of explanation of this behaviour relies heavily on memory loss: very roughly, these checkers see that the switch is in the off position but then a short time later they cannot properly recall the position of the switch. So information is gained at the check but then later lost. For some discussion see, e.g., Rachman (2002) and Van den Hout and Kindt (2003).

¹¹There is a possible case in which a sinking checker's epistemic situation keeps getting worse, but in ever-smaller increments so that it never gets so bad to make it that their answer-belief is no longer justified. This sort of "Zeno checker" is also interesting to think about, but I'm going to put Zeno aside in this discussion. His spectre will reemerge later in the paper, but I'll leave it unacknowledged.

4 INCESSANT CHECKING: ULTIMATELY IMPROVING EPISTEMIC POSITION

The mirror image of the sinking checker is the checker whose epistemic position is ultimately improving as they run through their checks. Let's call this character the 'climbing checker'. And we can focus on a straightforward kind of climbing checker: one whose epistemic standing with respect to their answer improves with every check. Of course a checker's epistemic position can ultimately improve without improving at every check, but everything I say about the more straightforward case will apply to that less straightforward case as well. In the straightforward sort of case, perhaps the climbing checker performs a good, new test at each check (e.g., checks the stove dial, then the temperature of the burner, then the stove lights, then calls a neighbour for a second opinion, and so on) so that each time they re-settle on their answer, their epistemic position is better than it was the previous time they settled.¹²

This is the sort of case that can make some kinds of *m*-checking appear unproblematic epistemically speaking – what could be epistemically wrong with getting more, good evidence and improving your epistemic situation? In fact, isn't the climbing checker a model epistemic subject? To answer this we'll need to think more about what happens when a question is put back up for inquiry. What is it to (re-)open a question in the sense at issue?

INTERLUDE: OPEN QUESTIONS

In Friedman (2017) I argued that anyone inquiring into *Q* at *t* is suspending judgment about *Q* at *t*. Our re-checkers are inquirers and so this claim extends to them. More specifically, at point **B** on our circle, re-checkers open a question up for inquiry, and so at point **B**, re-checkers suspend judgment about that question. Along the bottom arc, re-checkers are inquiring and so along the bottom arc re-checkers are suspending judgment.

I obviously can't fully rehearse my case for the tight connection between inquiry and suspension of judgment here, but I'll say a little bit about the con-

¹²There is a kind of incessant checker who just performs the very same test over and over, e.g., checks the stove dial again and again. I think this character is epistemically interesting too, but I don't think this character is a climbing checker. Repeating a test can plausibly improve your epistemic standing, but also plausibly becomes epistemically idle soon enough. Perhaps this character is on a flatter trajectory?

tours of that case. After that I'll say something about the connection between suspension of judgment and re-checking in particular.

On inquiry and suspension of judgment in general.¹³ A guiding thought for me has been that inquiring isn't just a matter of performing certain actions like walking over to the stove or moving your hand around in your bag. Even though walking from the front door to the stove and glancing at the stove dial can certainly be done in the service of an inquiry into whether the stove is on, it just as certainly need not be. It may be done as part of some other inquiry (Is the dial dirty? Are the temperature units °C or °F? Etc.), and it may have no inquiry-related purpose at all – perhaps you're doing a special dance that involves just those moves. Acts only count as acts of inquiry when they are grounded in or perhaps motivated by an inquirer's desire to know more or figure something out or understand something better. This means that genuine inquiry is an activity with an essential attitudinal component: inquirers have epistemic aims, and actions done in the service of inquiry are in part motivated by those epistemic aims.

This attitudinal component of inquiry comes in many familiar forms: curiosity, wondering, contemplation, deliberation, and more. I've called these attitudes 'interrogative attitudes'. All inquirers have interrogative attitudes, i.e., a subject inquiring into Q at t has an interrogative attitude towards Q at t . Inquirers are wondering where their passports are or curious about whether they left the stove on, and so on.

But the interrogative attitudes all involve suspension of judgment. Subjects who are convinced that something is the case typically aren't also curious or wonder whether it's the case. If I said, "Oh yes, I know who won the 2016 presidential election, but I'm curious: who won it?", you'd be hard-pressed to make sense of my comment. There seems to be some deep tension in the sorts of commitments my comment would naturally be taken to express. But what's so bad about both being curious about (or wondering about, deliberating about, etc.) Q while knowing what the answer to Q is? I think the best explanation of what's going wrong is that having an interrogative attitude towards a question involves or entails suspending judgment about that question. Anyone curious about Q or wondering about Q or deliberating about Q (and so on) is suspending judgment about Q . This is why conviction and curiosity are such unhappy

¹³The discussion in this section draws on both Friedman (2017) and Friedman (2019).

bedfellows.

These considerations move us towards the conclusion that inquirers are suspending judgment. The move comes by way of two key premises. First, anyone inquiring into Q at t has an interrogative attitude towards Q at t . And second, anyone who has an interrogative attitude towards Q at t is suspending judgment about Q at t . Since re-checkers are inquirers, they too are suspending judgment in the inquiring phase of their re-checking cycles.

On suspension of judgment and re-checking in particular. I think that any account of re-checking needs to say that re-checkers are in some sense changing their minds while cycling through their checks. Say you put your passport in your bag at t_1 . At t_1 , you know your passport is in your bag. And say that once you put it in the bag, you simply go about the rest of your packing; you're not worried about where your passport is. But at some point (t_2) you do start to worry about where your passport is and whether it's in your bag (maybe you actually have to leave for the airport at t_2). At t_2 , you become gripped by a kind of doubt or instability that simply was not there before – at t_2 you're worried about whether your passport is in your bag in a way you were not at t_1 .¹⁴ Any account of re-checking needs to say something about this sort of change in view. In general, at point **A**, re-checkers think that p is true, but then at point **B** they're not so sure anymore. A natural way of capturing the sort of doxastic backtracking we get at **B** is via a shift from believing p to suspending judgment about whether p is true.¹⁵

So looking back at our circle, we have incessant checkers believing p at point **A** and remaining believers along the top arc. They then suspend judgment about whether p is true at point **B** and inquire into that question along the bottom arc, performing some test or check. Then they come to believe p again at **A**, and then they suspend again at **B**, and so on, for some number of revolutions.¹⁶ But now we can ask: is the climbing checker justified in believing

¹⁴The discussion of 'epistemic anxiety' and its relation to cognitive effort and making up our minds in Nagel (2010) gives us a nice way of thinking about the sense of 'worry' at work here.

¹⁵We might try to capture this change in view/doxastic backtracking in some other way. For instance, perhaps something confidence-theoretic will do, e.g., a re-checker's credence in their answer drops. I don't think that this view does as good a job of capturing the state of mind of a re-checker (which isn't to say that confidence is never dropping in these sorts of cases). Unfortunately, I can't get into the details here. I do think that the sort of argument I make in this section can be generalized to other ways of fleshing out the doxastic backtracking we find in these re-checking cycles.

¹⁶Quick note: while I think subjects can suspend judgment and perform a test or check on

their answer? Are they justified in suspending judgment?

BACK TO CHECKING WITH IMPROVING EPISTEMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

I don't think we have any special reason to be suspicious of the climbing checker's beliefs. First, I assume that by and large our starting un-checked beliefs are justified. And second, given that our climbing checker's epistemic position with respect to their answer is improving, if they don't start in the sort of epistemic position that can justify their answer-beliefs, they will get there soon enough. But is the climbing checker always justified in suspending judgment about whether p is true?

There has been far less written about when suspending judgment is epistemically justified than there has been about when believing is. Although I don't have anything like a complete account to offer here, I do want to suggest some general constraints.

Let's start by considering the following:

The Overlap Thesis There are some cases in which a subject has justification for suspending judgment about whether p is true and also has justification for believing $p/\neg p$.

The Overlap Thesis does not say or imply that some epistemic circumstances put one in a position to both justifiably believe $p/\neg p$ and suspend about whether p is true at the same time. Rather, the thought is that in some cases, one's epistemic position at a time is such that whichever of these moves one made – believe $p/\neg p$, suspend judgment about whether p is true – one could end up with a justified doxastic attitude.

The Overlap Thesis is connected to theses having to do with 'permissivism' in epistemology. In broad brush, permissivism is the denial of 'uniqueness' which says that a set of epistemic circumstances (say, total evidence) permits at most one doxastic attitude. If permissivism is true then there are at least some epistemic circumstances that leave more than one doxastic attitude epistemically permissible.¹⁷ Although the Overlap Thesis is a thesis about justification in the first instance, I think we should say that if the Overlap Thesis is true, then

any kind of question, for ease of exposition I'm going to stick to discussing yes/no questions ('whether'-questions).

¹⁷See White (2005) for the canonical discussion.

at least some form of permissivism is true.¹⁸

Is the Overlap Thesis true? I think it is. And I think that reflecting on some of the conditions under which double-checking (re-checking just once) is appropriate help to make the case. Knowers and justified believers can at least sometimes double-check on the thing they know or justifiably believe without a change in epistemic circumstances and without doing anything epistemically wrong. We double-check addresses, directions, meeting times, proofs, recipes and more. This needn't be epistemically worrying behaviour. But if that's right then (given the other pieces of my argument so far) the Overlap Thesis is true. Say that at t_1 , S is in epistemic circumstances E_1 and knows p , and at t_2 , S is in epistemic circumstances E_2 and double-checks on whether p is true. Assume $E_1 = E_2$.¹⁹ If the Overlap Thesis is false then in no case like this does E_1/E_2 justify suspension of judgment, leaving the double-check epistemically transgressive.

But double-checking is often perfectly acceptable epistemic practice, even for a knower. Standard examples bear this out, but some theoretical considerations apply as well. Double-checking can be good epistemic practice because it can be good epistemic practice to question our beliefs. We are reflective subjects and we regularly engage in epistemic review and revision; or at least we should. Part of that process may involve putting back up to question something we already believe or even know. The good and reasonable epistemic subject doesn't only care about belief formation but cares about epistemic maintenance as well. Double-checking is an important part of that maintenance project.²⁰ So, even justified believers and knowers can double-check without irrationality, which means that the Overlap Thesis is true.

Notice, were one to reject the Overlap Thesis, one would have easy access

¹⁸In some form or other, epistemic permissivism is a fairly popular position. Most permissivists do not endorse a clear analogue of the form I'm contemplating here – i.e., that there are some epistemic circumstances that permit believing that also permit suspending judgment (although see Roeber (forthcoming) for a very recent defence). That said, I think many of the arguments in favour of some of the more commonly discussed forms of permissivism could easily bring my version along. For some of those arguments see, e.g., Kelly (2013) and Schoenfield (2013).

¹⁹As I hope is already clear, this is typically the case when we re-check. I don't typically lose evidence or acquire defeaters about your address before I double-check what it is. My evidence with respect to that question remains stable, I just become somewhat dissatisfied with that evidence.

²⁰One of the upshots of the arguments in this paper might be thought of as insight into the limits of this maintenance project: that double-checking may be good epistemic practice doesn't mean that incessantly checking is.

to an explanation of what's epistemically wrong with our climbing checker. If this *m*-checker starts their cycle of checking in the sorts of epistemic circumstances that justify believing, then they cannot re-open their question without epistemic transgression since their epistemic circumstances don't justify suspending judgment about the relevant question. And if they don't start in the sorts epistemic circumstances that justify their answer-belief, they will get into them soon enough given the sort of epistemic trajectory they are on. While I think the Overlap Thesis is true, and so this explanation a little bit too easy, it is on the right track.

To get the explanation right we should think about how far justificational overlap extends. In particular, let's consider the following thesis:

The Extreme Overlap Thesis Every case in which one has justification for believing $p/\neg p$ is also a case in which one has justification for suspending judgment about whether p is true.

If the Extreme Overlap Thesis is true, then any epistemic circumstances that justify believing also justify suspending judgment. If the Extreme Overlap Thesis is true, then there are no epistemic circumstances with respect to $p/\neg p$ too strong or too good to leave suspension of judgment about whether p is true unjustified. Let's call epistemic circumstances that justify believing $p/\neg p$ but don't justify suspending judgment about whether p is true, 'Suspension-Proof Epistemic Circumstances' (SPECs) with respect to whether p is true. It's not that one cannot suspend in SPECs, but that suspending is not justified in those sorts of epistemic circumstances. Is the Extreme Overlap Thesis true? Are there no SPECs?²¹

I think that there are SPECs and so that the Extreme Overlap Thesis is false. Sometimes the evidence is just too good and so agnosticism no longer reasonable. I hope this strikes the reader as intuitively compelling. Let me say a bit in defence of the existence of this sort of "SPECs zone" with respect to epistemic justification.

Say I come to your party and see Joe sitting on the sofa; Joe and I catch up. We need snacks though so I get up off the sofa and leave the room. Right outside the room, I bump into you. You ask me whether Joe is at the party. I say:

²¹To be clear: suspension-proof epistemic circumstances in this discussion are epistemic circumstances that are too good or strong for suspension of judgment. See Turri (2012) for some discussion of what may well be other sorts of epistemic circumstances in which suspension of judgment isn't justified.

"Well, I was just in the middle of catching up with him, and we needed snacks so I'm going to get us some, but I really don't know whether he's here/I'm agnostic about whether he's here". This is not a pretty speech; I take it that you'd think I'd misunderstood some commitment along the way. And I don't think the badness of the speech is merely a by-product of speaking the various sentences: its badness is (at least in part) a reflection of the badness of the package of commitments itself. This sort of example is easily multiplied.

And sometimes when things are right before our eyes, agnosticism is going to feel irrational or at least rationally suspect. If I'm agnostic about where my mother is while I'm having lunch with her, or agnostic about whether there are any dogs nearby while Fuzzy is sitting in my lap, or agnostic about whether it's raining out while standing outside in a thunderstorm getting soaked, I am not as I epistemically ought to be. Of course, as epistemologists we are good at telling stories that can push us to doubt even what is right before our eyes. But once we leave the epistemology classroom, agnosticism about whether p is true when p is so clearly (to me) true, is not reasonable.

Moreover, some of our other normative commitments in epistemology also give us grounds for thinking that there's a SPECs zone. Many epistemologists think that we can have epistemic requirements to believe, that sometimes the epistemic circumstances with respect to p make it that we ought to believe p . But if we ought to believe p in epistemic circumstances E , then plausibly we ought not suspend judgment about whether p is true in E . And if we ought not suspend judgment in E , then plausibly suspending judgment is not justified in E . So if there are epistemic requirements to believe, then, again, it looks as though there's a SPECs zone.

And if there is a SPECs zone then at some point the climbing checker is going to end up in it. Whether this happens sooner or later, once this incessant checker does get there, they can only continue checking by having an unjustified doxastic attitude. Given this, from that point forward their checking will be epistemically problematic.

Two quick points before broadening the discussion a little bit. First, my claim here is not that there is some precise number of checks n such that for every climbing checker n -many checks is fine, but $n + 1$ -many checks is epistemically problematic. I take it that the point at which epistemic circumstances become suspension-proof and so checks become problematic can vary from

case to case, may well be sensitive to what's at stake or vary with context. The conclusion so far leaves a range of possibilities open on this matter. Nothing I've said here should be thought to imply that it's obvious exactly when epistemic circumstances become suspension-proof (nor that there won't be any penumbral cases).

Second, it's worth highlighting the symmetry between the sinking checker and the climbing checker. While the sinking checker's epistemic position with respect to p will eventually deteriorate so much so as to no longer justify believing p , the climbing checker's epistemic position will eventually improve so much so as to no longer justify suspending judgment about whether p is true. Since re-checking cycles involve both believing p and suspending judgment about whether p is true, both sorts of incessant checkers are epistemically transgressive and in similar ways: they will each have to have some epistemically unjustified doxastic attitudes.

5 DISCUSSION

The upshot of the last section is that incessant checking is epistemically problematic or transgressive even if your epistemic circumstances keep improving as you keep checking. But now say you're checking and re-checking. You get to the point at which you're in the SPECS zone. Does the conclusion here imply that the norms of epistemology say that you are not allowed to perform another check or test or not allowed to inquire further in an effort to improve your epistemic standing? Well, I'm not quite sure whether we can say that it's strictly impermissible, but, yes, I think we should conclude that at this point there is a serious epistemic consideration against checking again, or that at this point continued checking would be epistemically transgressive: genuinely checking again involves having an unjustified doxastic attitude.

This is not a trivial conclusion – it says that there are cases in which even though you could improve your epistemic standing by inquiring further (and perhaps you are even fully aware of this), there is a serious strike against engaging in further inquiry. And this strike is a thoroughly (and “purely”) epistemic one. Genuinely checking again in these sorts of cases involves violating some fairly central epistemic norms.

It's important to be clear about what this conclusion does not say though. First, it does not say that it is epistemically problematic to (say) walk over to

the stove and look at the dial again. As I've said, it is simply not the case that any time one walks over to a stove and looks at the dial that one is genuinely checking on whether that stove is on (or checking on anything at all). Second, the claim that further checks are epistemically transgressive also doesn't imply that receiving new information about whether the stove is on is at all epistemically problematic. It's not the claim that there's a ban on your receiving new relevant evidence. If, after all your checks, your superintendent just happens to call you on the phone and tell you that your stove is off (maybe unbeknownst to you they're doing that for all the tenants that day), nothing I've said here implies that you do anything wrong by registering that information or by becoming more confident that the stove is off – you don't have to quickly hang up or block your ears. What is problematic now is not the receiving of new relevant information but the investigation of certain questions.

There are all sorts of norms that regulate and constrain the practice of inquiry. Some of those norms will guide us in our efforts to resolve questions, e.g., they'll tell us how to best achieve our inquiry-theoretic ends. Some will tell us which questions to open when, when we should give up an inquiry, when we're in a position to know the answer to our questions, or even which questions are better to pursue and which worse. And some norms of inquiry will place constraints on having questions open for inquiry at all. Part of what has emerged in this discussion is an epistemic constraint like this: a constraint on asking or continuing to ask a question. Having a question open for inquiry involves suspending judgment, and given that there are epistemic limits on when that attitude is appropriate, there are, by extension, constraints on when further inquiry is.²²

The sort of limit on appropriate suspension of judgment that has been relevant to this discussion is one that subjects can reach when their epistemic circumstances are too good or too strong to justify suspension of judgment. What more can we say about these mysterious suspension-proof epistemic circumstances? Even though I'm not going to be able to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for being in the SPECs zone, some of the things I've already said here tell us quite a bit about it.

²²And this sort of constraint on further inquiry is a constraint on having interrogative attitudes as well (given that they all involve suspending judgment). If you're in the SPECs zone with respect to *Q* then there's an epistemic strike against being curious about *Q*, wondering about *Q*, deliberating about *Q*, and so on.

First, if knowers can even sometimes unproblematically double-check (as I've said they can), then we should say that knowing p is not sufficient for being in the SPECs zone with respect to whether p is true. Second, some of the reasons I've given for thinking that there is a SPECs zone make it look as though it's not all that hard to reach it. So, we are regularly in the SPECs zone, but knowing isn't enough to get us there. Together, these put an interesting squeeze on the space of suspension-proof epistemic circumstances. So what more can be said about SPECs?

First, not only is knowing p not sufficient for being in SPECs with respect to p , but knowing p doesn't look necessary either: subjects can be in the SPECs zone with respect to p without having any opinion about whether p is true. And second, while subjects don't need to have an opinion, they do need to be in the sort of circumstances that justify having one. The question then is, what more could it take?

I don't have much more than speculation to offer here, but I think that some observations about re-checking might give us some insight. Let's focus on just simple double-checking. While it often seems fine for a subject to double-check on whether p is true when they know p , I don't feel as sanguine about the double-checker who not only knows p but is fully aware that they know p . If it's clear to you that you know p , then what is there to check on? So the proto-suggestion here is that suspension-proof epistemic circumstances might be thought of as closely related to the sorts of epistemic circumstances in which subjects know p and are fully aware that they know p . Fleshing this suggestion out is not at all straightforward. Crucially, I don't think we should capture this "awareness" or "clarity" in terms of more knowledge: just as first-order knowledge can be hidden from view, so can higher-order knowledge. Capturing what it takes for knowledge to be visible in the relevant sense and how that connects to improvements in epistemic standing are obviously serious projects. For now, all I can do is gesture in that direction.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

While I have spent most of this paper discussing the sort of re-checker whose epistemic position with respect to their answer is ultimately improving (as well as some of the broader implications of that sort of case), and I said a little bit about the checker whose epistemic position with respect to their answer is ulti-

mately deteriorating, I haven't discussed the sort of re-checker whose epistemic position isn't doing either of those things. There are a number of different kinds of 'stable checkers', some familiar, but many quite strange. As far as I can tell each manifestation is at least prima facie epistemically worrying. I'll have to leave that discussion for another time though. In focusing my discussion on the climbing checker, I hope to have shown that what might have seemed like the best sort of case for locating epistemically unproblematic *m*-checking, is not such a case at all. The climbing checker is going epistemically wrong in some crucial respects.

In incessantly checking, a subject opens and closes a question over and over again. But what about cases in which inquirers don't do that, but instead keep performing more tests without settling? On the assumption that inquirers are always suspending judgment, the arguments here can give us some guidance in these cases as well. We can wonder about why this non-settling inquirer is not settling. If the tests don't give them sufficiently good evidence, then further inquiry seems just fine. If the tests put them in the sorts of epistemic circumstances that justify believing/settling, but also justify suspending judgment/keeping the question open, then further inquiry can still proceed flawlessly given all I've said here. But, like the *m*-checker, with enough good tests, this inquirer too can end up in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances. At that point given that suspending judgment is no longer justified, further inquiry is going to be epistemically problematic.

So there is scope here for some general conclusions about epistemic norms on ending inquiry. And I want to be clear about what I think these norms are going to tell us. Let's say that one's epistemic standing with respect to *p* is 'improvable' if it can be made better or stronger. I assume that most epistemic circumstances are improvable. It's not at all obvious to me how to think about epistemic circumstances that are literally as good as they can be. I certainly think that typical suspension-proof epistemic circumstances are going to be improvable and that inquirers can easily know that they are. But if what I've argued here is sound, then I think we should say that epistemology can at least sometimes declare further inquiry into whether *p* is true, in epistemic circumstances with respect to *p* that inquirers know to be improvable, problematic. Sometimes even though there's more evidence to be had, and epistemic improvements to be made, and you know all this, epistemology can tell you to

stop.

This conclusion may seem surprising at first glance, but I think it does sit nicely with thoughts about the end or goal of inquiry. We don't tend to think that the end of inquiry is some sort of epistemic perfection, but something more modest like knowledge. But many cases in which we know p are cases in which our epistemic position with respect to p can be made better or stronger – even if we know p we can typically get more evidence in support of p . In fact, many of the cases in which we're fully aware that we know the answer to some question are ones in which another test could further confirm it. Nonetheless, it doesn't make much sense to carry on once the goal is reached (or at least once it's reached and we're aware of that). If the goal of inquiry is something we can achieve while being in improvable epistemic circumstances, then plausibly there are going to be plenty of cases in which further inquiry is epistemically problematic despite the fact that it could improve our epistemic positions. †

REFERENCES

- Buchak, L. (2010). Instrumental Rationality, Epistemic Rationality, and Evidence-Gathering. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24(1):85–120. 3
- Fallis, D. (2007). Attitudes Toward Epistemic Risk and the Value of Experiments. *Studia Logica*, 86(2):215–246. 2
- Friedman, J. (2017). Why Suspend Judging? *Noûs*, 51(2):302–326. 8, 9
- Friedman, J. (2019). Inquiry and Belief. *Noûs*, 53(2):296–315. 9
- Good, I. J. (1967). On the Principle of Total Evidence. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 17(4):319–321. 2
- Horwich, P. (1982). *Probability and Evidence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2

†Thanks to: Charity Anderson, Selim Berker, Dave Chalmers, Sam Kampa, Harvey Lederman, Lisa Miracchi, Miriam Schoenfield, Susanna Siegel, Amia Srinivasan, Evan Taylor, Ru Ye, and the UCLA Junior Prom crew: Josh Armstrong, Adam Crager, Daniela Dover, Katie Elliott, and Gabe Greenberg. Thanks also to: Eric Mandelbaum and the participants in his “Ignorance and Stupidity” seminar at CUNY, and to audiences at: the New York-China Epistemology conference at Fordham, the Suspension of Belief conference in Mannheim, Northwestern University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

- Kelly, T. (2007). Evidence and Normativity: Reply to Leite. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 75(2):465–474. 3
- Kelly, T. (2008). Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization. *Journal of Philosophy*, 105(10):611–633. 3
- Kelly, T. (2013). Evidence Can Be Permissive. In Steup, M. and Turri, J., editors, *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, page 298. Blackwell. 12
- Maher, P. (1990). Why Scientists Gather Evidence. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 41(1):103–119. 2
- Nagel, J. (2010). Epistemic Anxiety and Adaptive Invariantism. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24(1):407–435. 10
- Oddie, G. (1997). Conditionalization, Cogency, and Cognitive Value. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 48(4):533–541. 2
- Rachman, S. (2002). A cognitive theory of compulsive checking. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40(6):625–639. 7
- Roeber, B. (forthcoming). Permissive Situations and Direct Doxastic Control. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 12
- Schoenfield, M. (2013). Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief. *Noûs*, 47(1):193–218. 12
- Turri, J. (2012). A Puzzle About Withholding. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 62(247):355–364. 13
- Van den Hout, M. and Kindt, M. (2003). Repeated checking causes memory distrust. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 41(3):301–316. 7
- White, R. (2005). Epistemic Permissiveness. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19(1):445–459. 11