1 INTRODUCTION

You're wondering whether you 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 walk away. 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 a 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. When you keep checking whether your stove is off, you’re getting more and more information about whether it’s off. Isn’t having more

†Please ask if you want to cite it though.
evidence on some matter better than having less, and so getting more evidence always acceptable (and even laudable) from the perspective of epistemology? 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 make the case that incessant checking is always epistemically problematic and show exactly where the incessant checker is going epistemically wrong. As we’ll see, from the perspective of epistemology and epistemology alone there is something wrong with incessant checking.

The arguments to come have broader epistemic implications as well: 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 their 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. My plan here is to look at how things will unfold along either sort of epistemic path and bring out just how each is going to be epistemically problematic. As we’ll see, the epistemic flaws will show up in different places in different cases, but often these flaws will be very standard.

Good (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).

While 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). OCD-related checking will come up again a bit later, but in this paper, I want to mostly be thinking about re-checking that isn’t part of a genuine disorder.
e.g., the incessant checker will have unjustified doxastic attitudes.

2 GROUNDWORK

The phenomenon I’m interested in in this paper can be called ‘re-checking’. And I’m interested in a particularly robust form of re-checking: one in which the re-checker is genuinely inquiring further into their question. Sometimes we “re-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. Perhaps in some of these cases, the behaviour is more like a tic than a genuine investigation. I’m interested in the cases that are genuine inquiries or investigations. My re-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.

Often we start inquiring from a position of ignorance and neutrality. I don’t know where the dog went, so I check the yard. Re-checking isn’t borne from neutrality or ignorance though. If I have no idea whether my passport is in my bag then fishing around in there can count as a check but it won’t count as a re-check, e.g., a double-check. To double-check whether my passport is in my bag I need to already think it is. Checks are inquiries, and re-checks (at least as I’m using the term) are inquiries into matters that the re-checker has already settled.

Here is the general form that a cycle repeated re-checking takes then. A re-checker starts settled with respect to a question \(Q\) (e.g., is the stove off?) – they already know \(Q\) or at least believe an answer to \(Q\) (it’s off); then they open \(Q\) again (is it off?) and collect more evidence on the matter (look at the dial); they settle the question again as a result of the check (it’s off); they re-open the question again (is it off?) and do another test (look at the dial again or maybe check the burner this time); they re-settle again (it’s off); and so on. I’m going

\[3\] My use of ‘re-check’ may be slightly misleading then. It may seem to imply that the relevant subjects already checked or inquired, but this needn’t be the case here. What matters is that they had already settled the relevant question, whether by inquiry or some other (less intentional) way.
to call this sort of extended cycle of re-checking ‘m-checking’. I’ve also called it ‘incessant checking’, although of course it does stop at some point.

One slight complication. In order to get genuine cases of m-checking, I think re-checkers need to do more than just open and close a question over and over: I think they need to be closing their question on the same answer each time. Say I think you’ve left the house, but I become doubtful and want to double-check whether you’re home or not. I call your phone and hear it ring upstairs. As a result, I change my mind and come to believe that you haven’t left yet. I’ve re-settled the question of whether you’re home or not, but not in the same way as I had originally settled it. Now say I become gripped with further doubt and want to check whether you’re home or not once more. This doesn’t seem to be a triple-check. When I re-settle the question of whether you’re home differently than I had originally settled it and then go back after that to re-check given my new answer, that looks like a double-check rather than a triple-check. For the re-checks to keep adding up, the checker needs not just to re-settle the question but re-settle it in the same way. That is, if a subject starts settled on \( p \) as the answer to \( Q \), their double-check has to take them back to \( p \) if the next check is going to count as a triple-check; and the same goes for further checks.

Why should this be? I think part of what’s going on is that we should think of re-checks as checks not just on questions but on ‘focused questions’, which we can think of as question-proposition pairs. Re-checkers re-check on a question and a proposition that they take to answer the question. To get multiple re-checks we need multiple checks not only on some question \( Q \) but on some \( \langle Q, p \rangle \) pair such that \( p \) is the answer the checker takes to settle \( Q \). So to get a triple-check, we need a subject who settled on \( p \), re-checks on \( \langle Q, p \rangle \), re-settles on \( p \), and then re-checks on \( \langle Q, p \rangle \) again. And the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for quadruple, quintuple, and greater re-checks. In the discussion to come, I’ll sometimes say that re-checkers are re-checking questions, sometimes answers. Strictly speaking though they are always re-checking both.

My plan is to show just why incessant checking is epistemically problematic. This may well help shed light on questions about whether or why or to what extent it’s practically wasteful, but I’m not going to explore those connections here. I also don’t mean to say that the sorts of epistemic flaws I’m about to point
to are the only ones we might find in these sorts of repeated cycles of checking and re-checking; there may be others as well.⁴

In order to make my case, I’m going to make use of 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 degree sense), but rather a matter of something like the strength of their evidence for \( p \). We can ask: what does the subject’s total evidence have to say about \( p \) at \( t \), e.g., do they have any evidence in support of \( p \)? If so how good or strong is it?⁵

A helpful way to think about this kind of epistemic standing that will be useful for the discussion to come is to think of it in relation to epistemic justification. Given any proposition \( p \) that \( S \) can grasp at \( t \), we can think about the extent to which \( S \) is (or perhaps would be) justified in believing \( p \).⁶ This gets us something like a degree of epistemic justification for believing \( p \) at a time. And we can think of this degree of justification as a reflection or consequence of or perhaps as grounded in a subject’s epistemic standing or position at the relevant time. So there is a tight connection between one’s degree of epistemic justification for believing \( p \) and one’s epistemic standing with respect to \( p \).

With that background in place, I want to partition the cases of \( m \)-checking into three kinds. With each re-check, one of three things will happen: 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 will deteriorate, e.g., they’ll get evidence against their answer, or it will stay the same. And then we can mark a

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⁴For instance, Buchak (2010) highlights some (plausibly epistemic) risks of further tests or checks. And perhaps it’s worth thinking more about the extent to which endless focus on one question is wasteful in a properly epistemic sense, e.g., it prevents us from making other sorts of epistemic progress.

⁵In 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 \( p \). I prefer the more general way of talking myself, but nothing of significance hangs on it here.

⁶A distinction is often made between ‘propositional’ epistemic justification and ‘doxastic’ epistemic justification. I’ll say a bit more about the distinction later. Until then I mean to be talking about propositional justification.
mostly analogous distinction with respect to the repeating cycle of re-checking: as the number of re-checks is mounting a checker’s epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer are going to be ultimately improving, ultimately deteriorating, or neither.

The case in which the incessant checker’s epistemic position deteriorates as they run through their checks is fairly strange. Recall, to get a genuine case of incessant checking we need the relevant subject to keep settling on the same answer over and over again, e.g., that the stove is off. But then this case is one in which your checks on whether the stove is off provide evidence against your answer, evidence that the stove is on, but you keep going back to thinking it’s off nonetheless. It’s hard to know what might be going on in this case, and it seems clearly epistemically problematic to keep getting evidence against your answer but going back to it nonetheless. So I don’t think we need to say more about this sort of case. This leaves two relevant epistemic trajectories open: one in which an $m$-checker’s epistemic standing improves and the other in which it doesn’t improve but doesn’t deteriorate either. I’ll argue that in both kinds of cases, the typical $m$-checker is going epistemically wrong.

A final bit of stage setting. I’ve been using expressions like “epistemic flaws”, “going epistemically wrong”, and “epistemically problematic” to describe the $m$-checker or their $m$-checking. These are meant to serve as generic ways of saying that something is epistemically not OK. In what’s to come I’m going to make clear exactly where these epistemic wrongs, or problems, or flaws are.

3 $M$-CHECKING: ULTIMATELY IMPROVING EPISTEMIC POSITION

A natural thought about an incessant checker’s epistemic progress as they run through their re-checks is that their epistemic position with respect to their answer is getting better or stronger the more the cycle repeats. Here we might imagine the progress as a step function. One manifestation of this sort of pattern is one according to which an $m$-checker’s epistemic position improves with each check. Let’s think about this straightforward sort of case to start. In this sort of case perhaps the $m$-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 etc.), gathers new evidence relevant to the question and settles their question based on that new check. Then they do the same thing again. And again. And again.

This is the sort of case that might make \( m \)-checking appear unproblematic epistemically speaking – what could be epistemically wrong with getting more, good evidence and improving your epistemic situation? To answer this we’ll need to move beyond the schematic outline so far presented of the doxastic changes the \( m \)-checker goes through. What does it take to have a question settled, and what happens when a question is put back up for inquiry again?

First, on settling a question. Perhaps knowing the answer to \( Q \) is sufficient for having settled \( Q \), but I don’t think that it’s necessary. A subject who becomes convinced on good, but misleading grounds that the problem is the spark plugs when it’s actually a misfiring cylinder may have settled the question of what’s wrong with their car in just the way we’re after here. It seems as though subjects who have settled a question must at least believe some answer to that question.

So let’s say that re-checkers start off believing some answer to a question. Then, for whatever reason, they come to doubt that answer and want to check on whether it’s right. So (very roughly) they start off thinking they have the answer but then they’re not so sure. How should we think about this change in view?

I think we can get some guidance by thinking about the states of mind of inquirers generally, since re-checkers are inquirers. Inquirers are asking and trying to answer questions. They are curious about where their keys are, who is going to be at the party, and whether the stove is on; they are wondering about how much their suitcase weighs, what the weather is going to be like when they get there, and whether they brought their passports. Friedman (2017) argues that these sorts of inquiring attitudes – attitudes like curiosity and wondering – always come along with suspension of judgment, and since these attitudes are so central to inquiry in general, that inquiring entails suspension of judgment.

I want to follow Friedman here: when our re-checkers shift to inquire into their questions again, they suspend judgment while re-investigating the matter. Let me say a bit more about this thought now, and then I’ll say even more later.

The subjects we’re interested in here move to genuinely “re-ask” some ques-
tion – did I turn off the stove? Did I put my passport in my bag? In doing this they question the thing they originally thought, e.g., that they turned off the stove or put their passport in their bag. These subjects aren’t thinking: yes, the stove is off, but I’m going to check whether it’s off. They are thinking: wait, is it actually off? Or: shoot, did I really put my passport in my bag? My thought is that we can capture what happens when this doubt takes hold via a shift from believing some answer to $Q$ to suspending judgment about $Q$.

All of this gives us a picture of re-checking according to which the re-checker shifts from belief to suspension of judgment and checks again. If they go further than a double-check this cycle repeats itself. Incessant checkers start off believing some $p$ that they take to answer $Q$, they shift to suspension of judgment about $Q$, perform a test or check, come to believe $p$ again, and then some time passes before they shift to suspension again, check again, believe again, and so on.

Now we can ask of a given $m$-checker: to what extent are these doxastic attitudes justified? So far all I’ve said about epistemic justification is that one’s degree of epistemic justification for believing $p$ tracks the strength of one’s epistemic standing with respect to $p$. A fairly rough thought: the stronger one’s epistemic position with respect to $p$ the stronger one’s epistemic justification for believing $p$.

This degree notion of epistemic justification is fairly fine-grained though, more fine-grained than we’ll need for this discussion. Given this, I am going to follow much of the literature on epistemic justification and think of it in a binary way. So rather than thinking about how much justification one has for believing $p$ given one’s epistemic standing with respect to $p$, I just want to think about whether one’s belief $p$ is justified given one’s epistemic standing with respect to $p$. Presumably, we can locate this binary notion of justification in the graded notion: when one’s degree of justification for believing $p$ is sufficiently high, we can say that one is justified (full-stop) in believing $p$.

So the step-functional $m$-checker, qua re-checker, starts off believing $p$. I take it that typically these starting un-checked beliefs are justified. In the case in which they are not, we can assume that they quickly earn their justification after a re-check. And given that this sort of step-functional $m$-checker’s epistemic
position with respect to their answer is improving, it seems fair to say that as they re-settle on $p$ each subsequent time, those beliefs will also be epistemically justified. But is this $m$-checker justified in suspending judgment about whether $p$ is true given their epistemic position with respect to $p$?\(^7\)

So far I haven’t said anything about when that attitude is justified (or not), and I’m not going to provide a general account here. A fairly pressing question for our purposes though is whether subjects can have justification for believing (say) $p$ and also for suspending judgment about whether $p$ is true: whether given one’s epistemic circumstances one could justifiably go either way. This is pressing now since I’m assuming that the step-functional $m$-checker’s answer-beliefs are by-and-large justified.

Let’s call the thesis that there are at least some cases in which subjects have justification for suspending judgment about whether $p$ is true and also have justification for believing either $p$ or its negation, the ‘Overlap Thesis’. The Overlap Thesis does not say or imply that some epistemic circumstances put one in a position to both justifiably believe $p$ and suspend about whether $p$ is true at the same time. Rather it says that in some cases, one’s epistemic position is such that whichever of these moves one made – e.g., believe $p$, 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.\(^8\) Although the Overlap Thesis is a claim about justification in the first instance, I think we should say that if the Overlap Thesis is true, then at least some form of permissivism is true. This flows in part from a more general claim about the relationship between epistemic justification and epistemic permisibility, viz., if having some attitude is epistemically justified at $t$, then having that attitude is epistemically permissible at $t$. These days the debate

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\(^7\)Quick note: while I think subjects can suspend judgment and perform a test or check on any kind of question, for ease of exposition I’m going to stick to discussing yes/no questions (‘whether-questions’).

\(^8\)See White (2005) for the canonical discussion.
over which of uniqueness or permissivism is true takes many forms: some of the discussion is about disagreeing subjects with the same evidence, some is about different histories I could have had, some about Bayesian priors. I am not interested in the interpersonal cases here, but only intrapersonal permissivism. Nor am I going to think about questions about different versions of me with different histories in this paper. I am interested in what epistemic moves we are allowed to make at a time given the epistemic circumstances we're in at that time. The Overlap Thesis entails at least part of an answer to this sort of question.

The Overlap Thesis strikes me as fairly plausible. When Descartes decided to set his knowledge on a firmer foundation he started by suspending judgment about much of what he had taken himself to know. His suspending judgment doesn't seem epistemically problematic in this case (and such an accusation is not typically levelled against the Cartesian method of doubt). But that Descartes was justified in suspending judgment at that time also doesn’t seem to imply that the beliefs that he gave up were all unjustified. Descartes had a set of beliefs, and then without getting any new evidence, he shifted to suspending judgment on many of the issues so that he could re-investigate. But neither his believing nor his suspending seem unjustified.

So the Overlap Thesis has some initial plausibility. That said, we don't need to decide whether the Overlap Thesis is true just yet. Of course, if we reject it, we'll then have an easy argument for what's going wrong with our step-functional m-checker. So, let's assume it's still on the table. What I think we do need to decide on is a stronger thesis: what we can call the 'Extreme Overlap Thesis'. The Extreme Overlap Thesis says that every case in which one has justification for believing \( p \) 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. The Extreme Overlap Thesis entails the Overlap Thesis. Is the Extreme Overlap Thesis true?

I don’t think so. Say I know \( p \) and \( (p \rightarrow q) \). And let’s say this isn’t a tricky

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9See the Kopec and Titelbaum (2016) for a good overview of the different forms the debate takes.
I'm aware that I know these things. Then I consider whether \( q \) is true. If the Extreme Overlap Thesis is true then I'm justified in being agnostic about whether \( q \) is true. But this does not seem like the right result. The inappropriateness of that package of commitments is clear if we imagine my making a speech about it. I say: “Yes, Jess had scrambled eggs for breakfast, and yes, if she had eggs for breakfast then she doesn't want eggs for lunch. But does she want eggs for lunch? I really can't say.” This is not a pretty speech; I take it that we'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.

I also don't think that the counterexamples to the Extreme Overlap Thesis need to be very extreme. First, they don't need to involve entailing evidence. If the witness reports having seen Baby Face Nelson hold up the bank, and the robbery was caught on camera, and Nelson's DNA found on the safe, and I know all of this, it does not seem like agnosticism is an appropriate response on my part to the question of whether Baby Face did it. Unless I have grounds for serious doubts about some of the evidence (or some other reason for doubt) suspending judgment does not look like an appropriate response to my epistemic circumstances.

Second, it strikes me that even fairly ordinary cases make trouble for the Extreme Overlap Thesis. Say I come to your party and see Joe sitting on the sofa; Joe and I catch up. We need drinks 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 yet. Again, nothing tricky at all going on. It does not seem as though my considering the question and suspending judgment is appropriate. Again, our conversation makes that apparent when I say: “Well, I was just in the middle of catching up with him, and we needed drinks so I'm going to get us a couple, but I really don't know whether he's here/I'm agnostic about whether he's here”.

If the Extreme Overlap Thesis is false then there are some epistemic circumstances that don't justify suspension of judgment. Let's call these 'suspension-proof' epistemic circumstances. It's not that one cannot suspend in suspension-
proof epistemic circumstances, but that suspending is not justified in those epistemic circumstances.

So far then it looks as though there are at least some suspension-proof epistemic circumstances and that often they aren't terribly “extreme”. But I think that if these two claims are true then it's clear why the step-functional $m$-checker is going epistemically wrong at some point. Given that this $m$-checker's epistemic position with respect to their answer keeps improving, it looks as though they are (perhaps fairly quickly) going to be in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to whether that answer is true. And given my claim that re-checking involves suspending judgment, this means that re-checking is going to be epistemically problematic at that point, too: the step-functional $m$-checker will be suspending judgment despite the fact that that attitude is not justified given their epistemic circumstances. When you check the stove dial, the light, the burner temperature, and so on, agnosticism just isn't a reasonable option anymore.

One might think: so much the worse for the claim that re-checking always involves suspension of judgment. I've already said a bit about why I think the re-checker is suspending judgment, and I will say more in the next section. For now though, two quick points before moving on to the next type of $m$-checker. First, it's worth pointing out that the conclusion here does not entail that there is some precise number of checks $n$ such that for every step-functional $m$-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). My thought is just that what is clear enough is that there are some suspension-proof epistemic circumstances and that the step-functional $m$-checker is going to get into them if not sooner, then later.

And second, an $m$-checker's epistemic position can be ultimately improving without improving at every check. Some checks may lead to no change at all and
others may even lead to their epistemic standing with respect to their answer deteriorating some. But if that epistemic standing is ultimately improving then the step-functional \( m \)-checker is going to end up in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer at some point, and so their incessant checking will end up epistemically problematic at some point too.

4 \( M \)-CHECKING: EPISTEMIC POSITION NEITHER ULTIMATELY IMPROVING NOR ULTIMATELY DETERIORATING

What about the cases in which \( m \)-checkers’ epistemic positions neither ultimately improve nor ultimately deteriorate? This could happen if none of the checks have any impact on checkers’ epistemic circumstances with respect to their answers. These \( m \)-checkers’ epistemic progress is flat from first check to last – no change at all. But this is not the only way an \( m \)-checker can end up, in the long-run, in much the same epistemic position with respect to their answer that they started in: if an \( m \)-checker’s epistemic gains and losses are balanced, then their epistemic position with respect to their answer will neither ultimately improve nor ultimately deteriorate. Let’s look at each type of case in turn.

4.1 FLAT

In this sort of case, although the \( m \)-checker is performing some checks, those checks have no impact on their epistemic standing with respect to their answers at all. But what could be going on that this is happening? Here is one way to think about it: either this re-checker is learning something new at a given check, or they are not. Say they learn nothing from a given check. That could certainly explain why the check has no impact on their epistemic standing. But if you do some sort of test or check in order to settle some question but learn nothing at all from the test, is it appropriate to then settle the question as a result? Let’s call this sort of check an ‘empty check’. It does not seem like good epistemic practice to come to believe \( p \) based on a test for \( p \) from which you learn nothing. And I think we should also be worried (and for similar reasons) if this re-checker does learn something new as the result of their check. If the check has no impact on their epistemic standing with respect to their answer,
then whatever they learn is irrelevant to that answer – it's neither evidence for nor evidence against the answer they are checking up on. Let's call this sort of check an ‘irrelevant check'. A subject learns something from an irrelevant check but what they learn is not evidentially relevant to the question/answer under consideration (although of course what they learn can be evidentially relevant to all sorts of other questions and answers). But now: is it appropriate to settle a question based on an irrelevant check? And again, it does not seem like good epistemic practice to come to believe $p$ based on a test from which you learn nothing that speaks to the question of whether $p$ is true.

There are two key thoughts in the last paragraph: (a) if some test has no impact at all on a subject’s epistemic standing with respect to their focal question, then it’s either empty or irrelevant; (b) coming to believe $p$ based on an empty or irrelevant check for whether $p$ is true is not good epistemic practice. I hope I’ve said enough about (a). Let me say more in defence of (b) then.

To do that I want to say a bit more about epistemic justification. There is very often a distinction made between ‘propositional’ epistemic justification and ‘doxastic’ epistemic justification. There is debate about exactly the terms in which each of these should be defined, but I think there is fairly wide agreement about the general form of each and about at least some aspects of their relationship.\textsuperscript{10}

If some belief is propositionally justified for a subject at a time then that subject’s epistemic circumstances with respect to that belief are sufficiently good or strong at that time, e.g., they have excellent evidence for the content of that belief. But that this sort of relation obtains between a proposition that is the content of a subject’s belief and that subject’s evidence, does not guarantee that the subject was sufficiently sensitive to that evidence in forming or maintaining the belief – for example, perhaps they took a lucky guess that $p$ was true rather than coming to believe $p$ based on their evidence. Without this sort of sensitivity to epistemic circumstances, although the subject may have the justification for believing, there seems to be an important sense in their belief isn’t justified. It’s typically said that in a case like this the relevant subject has propositional justification for believing but nonetheless their belief is not doxastically justified.

\textsuperscript{10}For some discussion of the distinction see Turri (2010).
We have propositional justification for believing at $t$ just by being in the right sorts of epistemic circumstances at $t$, but the beliefs we have are additionally doxastically justified only if we've also formed and/or maintained those beliefs properly in response to those circumstances.

What I want to argue now is that in the cases at issue re-checkers will have beliefs that are not doxastically justified. Recall, these cases are ones in which subjects perform some test for whether $p$ is true, that test is empty or irrelevant, but they re-settle on (say) $p$ anyway. I'm going to assume that it's right to say that these subjects come to believe $p$ again as a result of or in response to or based on the test or check. Of course, a test or check for $p$ could result in one's believing $p$ in a more roundabout way, e.g., via some deviant causal chain. I'm simply putting cases like that aside here.

We can mostly focus on irrelevant checks now since I take it that if coming to believe $p$ based on test or check for $p$ that yields some information but none of it is relevant to whether $p$ is true is epistemically problematic, then so is coming to believe $p$ based on a test or check for $p$ that yields no information at all. So let's think about coming to believe based on an irrelevant check. Say you decide to check (or “check”?) whether the stove is still on by tasting the grass outside your house. You taste the grass, find it sufficiently bitter and decide that the stove must be off. In this case, we can assume that this check adds nothing to your epistemic standing with respect to whether your stove is, in fact, on or off. Let's also assume that you started off with a (doxastically) justified belief that your stove was off: you looked at the dial before you left. In the sort of case we're thinking about now there is also no information loss (we'll think about that sort of case in a moment). So here's how we should think about this case then: you start off with a justified belief that the stove is off ($p$). But you become worried about whether it really is and decide you need to check again. This means a temporary shift away from believing and to suspending judgment. You taste the grass and decide, yes, the stove is off, and come to believe $p$ again.

Is that belief justified though?

If we assume that you started with a doxastically justified belief about the stove and lost no information, then plausibly when you come to believe $p$ again that belief is propositionally justified. There's a natural sense in which your
epistemic standing with respect to \( p \) is no worse than it was when you first
came to think the stove was off, i.e., you haven't lost any of the evidence that
justified believing that first time around. Is that newly formed belief doxastically
justified though? I don't think so.

Crucially, when you re-form your belief you do so on the basis of the taste
of the grass or your belief that the grass is bitter, which is not an appropriate
basis for believing that the stove is off. An important question now though is
whether, in cases like this, subjects are basing their beliefs on just the results of
the new check or on the results of the new check and the rest of their relevant
evidence. If the former then I think it's fairly clear that the beliefs formed as
the result of the check won't be doxastically justified.

What if you base your belief on your entire pool of relevant information
though? This case is somewhat trickier, but ultimately I think that we should
draw the same conclusion, viz., the relevant re-formed beliefs are not doxasti-
cally justified.

Here's an analogous case. Say you have a great deal of evidence that it's
termites destroying your balcony \( b \). You have enough to justify believing \( b \),
but nevertheless you're not convinced. You want to perform one more test:
reading the tea leaves. You read the leaves and they say (or “say”?) it's termites
and as a result you come to believe \( b \). Are you doxastically justified in believing
\( b \) here? Intuitively, no. Your tea reading seems to be playing a sufficiently
crucial enough role in your decision to settle the question that the resulting
belief does not look sensitive to your evidence in the right sorts of ways and
so seems to come out unjustified. This isn't to say that any case in which one
settles based even in small part on irrelevant information or an irrelevant check
is a case in which the resulting belief is not doxastically justified, but in the cases
at issue the irrelevant check/information is playing a central role in checkers'
decisions to settle. Given the outsized weight irrelevant evidence is being given
in these cases, the resulting beliefs are not doxastically justified.\(^{11}\) And as I

\(^{11}\)Here is one way to try to flesh out how important these checks are for coming to believe
again. What we're imagining now is that this re-checker comes to believe again based on (1)
the evidence they had for their answer pre-check, and (2) what they learn from the check. Now
we can think about two cases: the first in which the subject has (1) but not (2) and the second
in which they have (2) but not (1). If they lost their pre-check evidence but retained what they
said I think that all of the considerations just adduced in support of the thought that irrelevant checks don’t justify belief apply to empty checks as well (mutatis mutandis).

Overall then, \emph{m}-checkers who keep checking without a change in their epistemic circumstances are going wrong epistemically as well: their checks are empty or irrelevant and when re-checkers lean on these sorts of tests in settling their questions, the beliefs formed as a result are not doxastically justified.\footnote{I think it’s fairly plausible that \emph{m}-checkers often have epistemically unjustified answer beliefs. Here’s some evidence for this. Imagine you’re getting information from someone. You ask them whether Joe went to the party last night. They say “yes”, but then say that actually they need to check again. They come back from their double-check and report that Joe was at the party. Moments later they say, “Actually, I’m not sure, let me check once more”. They come back from that check and say, “Okay, yes, he was there”. And then moments after that they say, “Wait, let me just check once more”. And this keeps going. I take it this would be a confusing situation. Would you trust this person’s testimony about Joe’s having gone to the party when they come back for the eighth time and report that Joe was there? I certainly wouldn’t.}

4.2 BALANCED GAINS AND LOSSES

Sometimes I lock the door and then as I’m walking down the corridor I think: wait, did I lock my door? And when I search my mind I can’t find a clear memory that I did, so I go back and double-check. Sometimes in cases like this, I never paid attention to the door locking in the first place and so when I go back to check on the door I’m not really double-checking but just trying to figure out for the first time whether it’s locked. Other times I’m just forgetful. And I take I’m not alone here.

The sort of case in which information is repeatedly gained in a check and then later forgotten strikes me as a fairly natural manifestation of the sort of \textit{“wavy”} \emph{m}-checker we’re considering now: one whose epistemic losses and gains balance out over time. But it’s not the only way this sort of pattern can manifest itself, so I want to mention (and then put aside) some alternatives before thinking more about forgetful re-checkers.

First, although the wavy \emph{m}-checker’s epistemic position with respect to their learned from the check would they continue to believe their answer? I don’t know that there’s a clear answer here, but it’s at least plausible that they would. On the other hand, I think it’s much easier to evaluate the other counterfactual: these subjects are re-checking exactly because they are not satisfied with believing based on just their pre-check evidence.
answer does change at some point as they run through their checks, it doesn’t need to change with every check – some checks might well have no epistemic impact at all. Whatever change there is is offset somewhere down the line, but there may well be checks along the way the result in no change at all. But we’ve just seen why checks that have no impact at all are going to be epistemically problematic, so we can stay focused on checkers whose epistemic standing does change somehow with each check.

This still leaves all sorts of trajectories open. Crucially, at a given check a checker’s epistemic position with respect to their answer can improve or deteriorate. The sort of forgetful double-checking discussed at the start of this section can get us cases in which one’s epistemic position with respect to one’s answer does improve as a result of one’s checks but then the information is later lost, leaving one in much the same place as one began. In theory the reverse could happen, i.e., a checker could lose standing as the result of a check but then somehow regain it later on. I find it very difficult to think of what could be going on in a case like this though. This checker performs a check, gets information against their answer, re-settles on the answer anyway, but then later accidentally comes upon information that restores their standing to pre-check levels. I think we can put cases like this aside here. First, as we’ve already seen, checking whether \( p \) is true, getting evidence against \( p \) and then coming to believe \( p \) as a result is not good epistemic practice. Moreover, what could be going on in this sort of case that the checker just bumps into evidence for their answer in between checks (maybe more than once)?

This leaves us with the sort of case with which I started the section. Here an \( m \)-checker’s progress might look something like a square wave, with information gained at a check and then lost, and then gained again at the next check and then lost, and so on.\[13\]

\[13\] This is a pattern that some of us actually do instantiate. There is evidence that truly compulsive checkers – subjects with OCD who can spend hours checking whether a switch is off or a dial in some position over and over again – are having a difficult time retaining the information they get from their checks. In fact, it’s been argued that the compulsive re-checking breeds a kind of familiarity that actually makes it harder to recall the details of e.g., the position of the stove dial. See, e.g., Rachman (2002) and Van den Hout and Kindt (2003) for more. I’m not sure what sort of normative verdict to render about genuinely compulsive checking. This gets into questions about the relationship between pathology and rationality that I don’t feel well placed to answer.
For instance, this sort of \textit{m}-checker knows that the stove is off at \( t_1 \), but then at \( t_2 \) loses some of the evidence that it is (so that their epistemic circumstances with respect the proposition that it is off deteriorate); then they go back and check on the stove again at \( t_3 \), see that the dial is in the off position (\( p \)) and then come to again know that the stove is off; but then at \( t_4 \) they forget \( p \), and are prompted to check again, and so on. In this case, we’ll have an \textit{m}-checker whose epistemic standing with respect to their answer is fluctuating as they run through their checks but is neither ultimately improving nor ultimately deteriorating. What they lose in between checks they simply gain again with the next check. What should we say about this forgetful \textit{m}-checker?

Intuitively, this \textit{m}-checker is not thriving epistemically. Two quick things to note before I go into more detail about their epistemic failings. First, the sort of case we need to be thinking about now is one in which the epistemic losses and gains are fairly balanced. If not, then we’ll have a case in which the relevant \textit{m}-checker’s epistemic circumstances are ultimately improving or ultimately deteriorating, and we’ll be back in one of the earlier types of cases. This makes the sort of case we’re trying to get at now rarer than it might have seemed. Second, we also need to distinguish the forgetful \textit{m}-checker we want to be focused on now from one who doesn’t have the right sort of information in the first place. As I noted, if I never had any opinion about whether the door was locked, then going back isn’t a double-check. Also though, if I keep going back to check on the door but don’t learn anything from the check, I might later say that I can’t recall whether I locked it, but this isn’t a case of information loss since I’m not getting the information in the first place. Rather, this looks like the sort of case in which I’m really not properly checking, e.g., my checks are empty or irrelevant as before and so my beliefs unjustified.

So what we’re basically left with in this sort of case is an inquirer who learns something, forgets it, goes back to learn it again, forgets it again, goes back yet again for the information, but then loses it right after once more, and so on.\footnote{Two quick notes about the forgetful \textit{m}-checker. First, I’m assuming that this subject learns something in a check and then forgets what they learned. There is a slightly different forgetful \textit{m}-checker who instead forgets some other relevant evidence they have after each check. Everything I say applies to this forgetful checker as well. And second, the extremely forgetful \textit{m}-checker forgets not only what they learned in the check but more, e.g., that they performed a check at}
Even if we insist that all of this subject’s beliefs and suspensions are in good epistemic order, this re-checker is far from epistemically ideal. Understanding exactly why gets into somewhat subtle issues about the extent to which we fail epistemically by losing certain kinds of information, and so I’m obviously not going to be able to say as much as I’d like here.\footnote{In fact, it’s not even clear exactly how we should be understanding “forgetting” or “information loss”. For a good overview of some of the option space see Frise (2018). For a couple of interesting – and very different – takes on the epistemic (dis)value of forgetting see Michaelian (2011) and Carr (2015).} But let me make a start at least.

What seems roughly right is that there are many episodes of forgetting that we don’t tend to think of as rational failings. No one accuses me of irrationality because I can’t remember the nineteenth movie I ever saw or what I had for lunch on December 05, 2011. It’s less clear to me though whether we want to say that there is nothing at all epistemically unfortunate about even this sort of mundane information loss. Certainly from some perspective knowing more is better.

The forgetful checkers we’re thinking about now aren’t losing mundane information though. This sort of subject is inquiring into some question. This means that they are trying to answer some question – where their keys are, whether the stove is off, whether they have their passport. Answering a question is a matter of having a certain kind of attitude towards the answer to the question, e.g., knowing that their keys are in the bottom drawer in the kitchen or that they turned the stove off. But the inquirers we’re thinking about don’t achieve their epistemic ends by just coming to know those answers for a fleeting moment. They want to not only form but retain their answer-attitudes. The wavy $m$-checkers we’ve just been considering are losing information in ways that make it that they cannot achieve these more temporally extended epistemic goals. While we may not have standard justificatory failures in this case, we do have some sort of inquiry-theoretic failure here: these subjects are losing the information they need to achieve their epistemic ends. So whether or not it’s plausible that all forgetting is epistemically unfortunate, repeated forgetting of information one knows that one needs to achieve one’s epistemic ends does all. I think the arguments to come tell against the extremely forgetful $m$-checker just as well.
seem more clearly epistemically problematic or transgressive. Given all this, I think we should conclude that this sort of cycle of forgetful $m$-checking is also epistemically problematic.

5 DISCUSSION

There were three epistemic paths an $m$-checker could go down. One in which their epistemic position ultimately deteriorates, one in which it ultimately improves, and one in which it neither improves nor deteriorates in the long run. I took the first of these to be obviously epistemically problematic, and now I’ve argued that the other two are as well. Notice, that the epistemic faults are not the same in every case of $m$-checking: sometimes $m$-checkers will have unjustified doxastic attitudes, but sometimes the problem is that they are being unacceptably forgetful. Crucially, it’s not always the checking per se that’s problematic; sometimes the flaw lies elsewhere in the cycle of incessant checking. Either way, $m$-checking is always epistemically problematic somehow. Let me say a bit about some other implications of the arguments I’ve just made, and tie up a few important loose ends.

5.1 CHECKING, SUSPENDING JUDGMENT, AND THE END OF INQUIRY

I argued that when a re-checker’s epistemic position is ultimately improving, $m$-checking goes epistemically wrong because it eventually involves unjustified suspension of judgment.

The claim that checking involves suspending judgment is obviously bearing a heavy load in that argument, and so I want to start here by doing a bit more to defend it. Recall, we’re interested in cases in which subjects are genuinely re-investigating or re-inquiring into some matter. Re-checking in this sense isn’t a matter of merely walking over to the stove and turning your head (which you might do for any number of reasons, e.g., you’re stretching) or touching your back pocket (again). For those sorts of actions to count as re-checks in the sense

\footnote{Maybe ‘always’ is slightly too strong? What if a demon were to steal your evidence after each check? Or you just happen to run into a defeater after each check? Maybe we’ll want to count these as cases of genuine $m$-checking, but I’m not sure. I think we can at least say that if any of us find ourselves in an actual cycle of re-checking, that cycle will be epistemically problematic.}
we’re interested in – for them to count as parts of genuine inquiries – they have to be actions that are grounded in or perhaps motivated by genuine questioning.

What counts as genuine questioning? Here’s a way to think about it. When you’re checking whether the stove is off again (in the sense at issue here) you’re genuinely wondering whether it’s on or off or genuinely curious about that. But as we’ve seen re-checkers are settled on some answer to their focal question in the lead-up to their decision to check again. Take a subject who knows the stove is off or that their passport is in their bag. It’s hard to see this subject as curious whether the stove is on or wondering where their passport is – they already know the answer to these questions (think about how awful assertions of this combination sound, e.g., “I know that the stove is off, but I’m curious/wondering: is the stove off?”). Part of what I take that to show is that wondering or being curious about some question isn’t typically a state that is somehow cordoned off from one’s take on the answer to that question. When one shifts to genuinely re-inquiring into a question, one’s take on the answer to that question typically shifts with it. Someone genuinely curious or wondering about \( Q \) doesn’t also know the answer to \( Q \) (at least not typically). So it looks as though in re-checking these subjects go from knowing to not knowing. I take it that this happens by way of belief loss. Questioning the thing one thought typically has an impact on the thought itself, it’s not something entirely quarantined from that thought. Questioning whether \( p \) is true naturally impacts one’s conviction that it is (or isn’t).

So when we’re thinking about the state of mind of the re-checker, I don’t think we should be thinking of them as simply insatiable believers or knowers, subjects who have settled the relevant questions but still want more. It’s exactly because they don’t (or at least no longer) take matters to be settled or think they have enough information that they go back for more. This means that we shouldn’t be thinking of the incessant re-checker as just wanting more and more evidence, but we should instead be saying that their attitude with respect to their question/answer is itself vacillating. They settle on some answer but then question it, and then settle again and then question their answer again. An accurate account of the doxastic or epistemic state of the re-checker then should have them shifting their view on whether their answer is the right one.
A straightforward way to capture what happens to the re-checker's take on their answer is via suspension of judgment. What happens when the re-checker goes from knowing to not knowing or from believing to questioning? They stop believing and suspend judgment instead. We might try to capture this change in view in some other way. For instance, perhaps something confidence-theoretic will do, e.g., perhaps re-checkers become gripped by doubt post-checks and lose confidence in their answers; they check again with the aim of restoring that confidence.

I don't think that this view does as good a job of capturing the state of mind of the re-checker, but rather than get too far into those details, I simply want to point out that I don't think this way of conceiving of the re-checker's mind changes will do much to change the conclusion that a re-checking cycle in which epistemic circumstances are improving is eventually going to be epistemically problematic. The argument I made can be generalized: just as the step-functional checker's epistemic circumstances will eventually bar suspending judgment, they will also eventually bar the relevant lower degree of confidence. At some point this re-checker’s epistemic position simply won’t permit doxastic backtracking, whatever form that backtracking takes.\textsuperscript{17} While there is more to say here, I hope the general form of the argument is clear enough.

So I think that we should say that even when you're continuing to improve your epistemic standing by checking, incessantly checking is epistemically problematic. But now say you're checking and re-checking. You get to the point at which you're in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances. 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 look for more evidence to improve your epistemic standing? Well, I’m not quite sure whether we should say 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 perhaps that at this point continued checking would be epistemically transgressive: to

\textsuperscript{17}One quick plug in favour of suspension of judgment being the upshot of (or maybe just being) the relevant sort of doxastic backtracking. To say that someone has "suspended judgment" seems to imply that they've hit the pause button on making a judgment but are going to get back to it soon. But this is a fairly good description of sort of state the re-checker is in: they relent from believing briefly to have a quick check with exactly the aim of getting back to believing.
genuinely check again you’d need to move to an unjustified doxastic attitude and thereby violate some epistemic norms.

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, there is a serious strike against doing that. And this strike is a thoroughly epistemic one. From the perspective of epistemology alone genuinely checking again in these sorts of cases requires 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 in these cases. As I said, it is simply not the case that any time one walks over to the stove and looks at the dial that one is genuinely checking on whether the stove is on (or checking on anything at all). Second, the claim that further checks are transgressive also doesn’t say that you’re not allowed to receive any new information about whether the stove is on, or that you should ignore information relevant to that question; it’s not a bar on updating your epistemic state. If after all your checks your building management 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 says or implies that you’ve done anything wrong by registering that information or by becoming more confident that the stove is off. What is problematic now is not the receiving of new information, but the investigation of certain questions.

Here is a way to think about the relevant epistemic failing. In inquiry we ask and try to answer questions; inquirers have questions “open in thought” and are trying to resolve those questions. Plausibly though there will be all sorts of norms that regulate and constrain this practice. 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 – but others will tell us when it’s appropriate to have a question open at all – when we should or shouldn’t be inquiring in the first place. Part of what has emerged in this discussion is a certain kind of epistemic constraint on having a question open in the relevant sense, on asking it (again). My thought has been that 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.

5.2 DOUBLE-CHECKING, THE OVERLAP THESIS, AND SUSPENSION-PROOF EPISTEMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

The argument in this paper has, at a number of spots, relied on claims about which doxastic attitudes can be justified in which sorts of epistemic circumstances. And I've argued that there are at least some epistemic circumstances that can justify believing but will not justify suspending judgment – what I've called ‘suspension-proof’ epistemic circumstances. I've given what strike me as cases in which subjects are in these sorts of epistemic circumstances, but I haven't given anything like necessary and/or sufficient conditions for being in them. A closely related set of issues centres on what I've called the ‘Overlap Thesis’: the thesis that there are at least some epistemic circumstances that can justify belief and suspension of judgment (although not both at once). Is the Overlap Thesis true? Let's start with this question and work our way back to something of a start on suspension-proof epistemic circumstances.

I want to suggest that the framework I've provided here can be used to show that the Overlap Thesis is true. Recall, re-checkers are subjects who start off believing some \( p \) that they then come to question. Let's just focus on the cases in which they start off knowing \( p \). I'm assuming this is a fairly typical case: that many of our unchecked beliefs are known. I've argued that re-checking whether \( p \) is true involves a shift to suspension of judgment about whether \( p \) is true. Typically this is not in response to any new evidence coming in or any other change in epistemic standing like that. If the Overlap Thesis is false, then these knowers go epistemically wrong by double-checking, since their epistemic circumstances cannot justify both belief and suspension of judgment, and they do justify believing.

But this means that questions about whether and when double-checking (re-checking just once) is epistemically appropriate are highly relevant to the question of whether the Overlap Thesis is true. If we think it's ever epistemically appropriate for someone who knows or even just justifiably believes to double-check whether they've got things right then, given the arguments in this paper,
we should also think that the Overlap Thesis is true.

As it stands, the framework I've provided here can accommodate different positions on this issue, but I want to at least record my own intuitions about double-checking and so by extension what I think we should say about the Overlap Thesis and then suspension-proof epistemic circumstances.

It seems to me that double-checking is often perfectly acceptable epistemic practice. This seems right to me because it seems right that it's often appropriate from the perspective of epistemology to question our beliefs. That we've inquired well and have come to believe or know an answer as a result (or just came to know without having inquired first even), doesn't mean that inquiry on that matter is over forever. We are reflective subjects and we engage in epistemic review and revision all the time; or at least we should. Part of that process may involve putting back up to question something we already believe or even know. This strikes me as good epistemic practice. 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. One of the upshots of the arguments in this paper is insight into the limits of this maintenance project: that double-checking may be good epistemic practice doesn't mean that incessantly checking is.

But if it's right that a quick double-check in cases in which you know or justifiably believe is often just fine epistemically speaking then I think that we should say that the Overlap Thesis is true. In some cases (and perhaps even in many) more than one attitude can be epistemically justified. As I said earlier I think that this also means that a kind of permisivism must be true.\footnote{In some form or another epistemic permisivism is a fairly popular position. I'm not sure that anyone endorses exactly the form I'm endorsing here – i.e., that there are some epistemic circumstances that permit believing that also permit suspending judgment – but I think many of the arguments in favour of some of the more commonly discussed forms of permisivism bring my version along. For some of those arguments see, e.g., Kelly (2013) and Schoenfield (2013).}

This leaves us with the mystery of “suspension-proof epistemic circumstances”. Even though I'm not going to be able to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for being in those circumstances, I think that a couple of the claims in this paper set some substantive boundaries on the notion which tell us quite a bit about it. First, if knowers can even sometimes double-check and it's
not at all epistemically problematic, then we should say that knowing \( p \) is not sufficient for being in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to whether \( p \) is true. Second, I argued that suspension-proof epistemic circumstances are not all that extraordinary: they are not reserved for angels or supercomputers; subjects like us are regularly in these sorts of circumstances. Together these constraints put an interesting squeeze on the space of suspension-proof epistemic circumstances.

Let me close this section with some speculative remarks on what the character of this space might be. Even if knowing \( p \) is not sufficient for being in suspension-proof circumstances, I think we should say that being in a position to know \( p \) is necessary. The question then is: what more could it take?

Again, I think some intuitions about double-checking might give us some guidance. While it often seems fine to double-check on whether \( p \) is true when you know that it is, I don’t feel as sanguine about the double-checker who not only knows \( p \) but is fully aware that they do. If it’s clear to you that you know \( p \), then what is there to check on? So the starting 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 and are aware that they do. Fleshing this suggestion out is not at all straightforward. For instance, I don’t think we should capture this “awareness” 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 point in that direction.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Figuring out just what is going on in the mind of the incessant checker cannot be done without leaving the armchair. What I’ve argued here though is that whatever their reasons or motivations, their incessant checking is going to put them on some epistemic path with respect to the questions and answers they are checking on. My strategy in this paper has been to show that all of these paths are epistemically fraught.
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 further tests without ever settling in between tests? If we assume, following Friedman (2017), that an inquirer is always suspending judgment, then 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 permit belief, but also permit suspension of judgment, 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, I think 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 in epistemic circumstances 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 says you shouldn't keep inquiring.

This conclusion may seem somewhat surprising, but I think it does sit nicely with thoughts about the end or goal of inquiry. We don’t usually think that the end of inquiry is absolute certainty or 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
inappropriate despite the fact that it could improve our epistemic positions.\textsuperscript{19}

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