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 you become doubtful again and worry that the stove is not 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. A moment later 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 element – it’s cold. You leave the house. But then you worry again about whether it’s off – did you put your hand close enough to the element? – and so you call your neighbour and ask them to go over and check. They do and report it’s 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’s not the sort of behaviour we typically applaud or endorse. This sort of incessant checking looks pathological and like a serious misuse of time and energy. Is it epistemically acceptable behaviour though?

We might think so. 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 evidence on some matter always better and so getting more evidence always acceptable (and even laudable) from the perspective of epistemology?\(^1\) Moreover, isn’t double-checking often clearly good epistemic practice? You might

\(^{1}\)Please ask if you want to cite it though.

\(^{1}\)Good (1967) argued that it always pays in expectation to gather more evidence before acting. And some have argued that an epistemic analogue of this is true as well: that it always pays in, e.g., the expected accuracy of one’s beliefs, to gather more evidence. For instance see, Horwich (1982), Maher (1990), Oddie (1997) and Fallis (2007).
know that it’s the right arm you have to amputate in the surgery, but checking 
the chart once more to make sure before you go perform the operation seems 
not only epistemically permitted, but required.

I think it’s right that double-checking is epistemically good practice in this 
case; in fact I think it’s typically epistemically acceptable. From the perspec-
tive of epistemology it’s at least fine to double-check whether the stove is off, 
whether you took your passport, whether the proof is valid, and so on. That 
said, I don’t think that incessant checking is good or even acceptable epistemic 
practice. Incessant checking might be pathological and practically wasteful, but 
I think it’s epistemically bad in addition. Sometimes even though you could im-
prove your epistemic standing by checking again, epistemology demands you 
stop checking; or so I’ll argue.

My plan in this paper is first to say more about what happens when we 
double-check and triple-check and beyond. Once that picture is in place I’ll 
use it to show that incessant re-checking is not epistemically acceptable. And 
then I’ll say something about why double-checking often is. Both claims have 
interesting consequences for epistemology that will come out as we go.

2 GROUNDWORK

The phenomenon I’m interested in can broadly be called ‘re-checking’. And 
I’m interested in a particular manifestation of re-checking: one in which the 
re-checker is genuinely inquiring further into their question. Sometimes we “re-
check” in a less robust 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 tick than a genuine investiga-
tion. I’m interested in the cases that are genuine inquiries or investigations.

Qua re-checks these investigations are re-investigations. When I re-check in 
the sense at issue I inquire into a matter or question that was already settled for 
me, e.g., did I bring my passport? 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. In double-checking we re-check or re-inquire 
into a matter once, in triple-checking we re-check twice and so on.\(^2\)

\(^2\)The term ‘re-check’ may be somewhat misleading. There’s an implication that a re-checker 
has already checked, but the way I’m using the term this needn’t be the case. An investigation into
Here is a general characterization of the phenomenon of incessant checking (and I’ll flesh it out more in a moment). 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?), do another test (look at the dial again or maybe check the element this time), re-settle (it’s off), and so on.\(^3\) Let’s call this sort of typically excessive re-checking ‘\( m \)-checking’. I’ve also called it ‘incessant checking’, although of course it does stop at some point. Exactly what number \( m \) should be will be left open here; I assume that it will be different in different cases.

\( M \)-checking or incessant checking is excessive. I take it that this is roughly a claim about its being practically wasteful. Whatever the epistemic benefits, the practical cost is too high to make \( m \)-checking appropriate. This is a subtle claim about the interplay between potential epistemic gains and the practical costs a question \( Q \) is a re-check so long as the subject already has or had an answer to \( Q \). But that they start off thinking \( p \) (some answer to \( Q \)) doesn’t necessarily mean that they’ve already inquired into \( Q \) in any robust sense. Perhaps they just came to the answer by accidentally seeing it without intentionally investigating. What I’m calling a re-check is an investigation into a question where the re-checking or investigating subject starts with the question answered, rather than open (as we often do in inquiry).

\(^3\)In fact to get genuine cases of incessant checking I think re-checkers need to keep settling the question in the same way. Say I think that the stove is off and go back for a double-check on the question of whether it’s off. In this case though say I find that the dial indicates that the stove is on and I come to believe that. I’ve re-settled the question, but not in the same way as I had originally settled it. Now say I become gripped with further doubt and go back for yet another re-check on whether the stove is on. It’s standardly thought that the question of whether the stove is off is identical to the question of whether the stove is on. Given this, in the case just described I’ve double-checked on a question, re-settled it and then checked on it again.

I don’t think that we have a triple-check here though. When I re-settle the question of whether the stove is on differently than I had originally settled it and then go back after that to re-check my question this 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 these 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 hypothesis which they take to answer the question. To get multiple re-checks we need multiple checks not only on some question \( Q \) but on some \( (Q, p) \) pair where \( p \) is the answer they take to settle \( Q \). So to get a triple-check we need a subject who settled on \( p \), re-checks on \( (Q, p) \), re-settles on \( p \) and then re-checks on \( (Q, p) \) again. And the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for quadruple, quintuple, and greater re-checks. I’ll just continue to say that re-checks are directed at a question even though strictly speaking they should be thought of as directed at focused questions.
that come with making those gains. It's not at all obvious how we should weigh these sorts of considerations against each other. While I think it's both interesting and important to think about this interplay between epistemic benefits and practical costs, that's not my plan in this paper. I want to focus just on epistemic issues here. From the perspective of epistemology alone is $m$-checking excessive? Even if it's excessive is it at least acceptable epistemic practice to check again and again? As I've said, at first glance it seems as though even if it's in some sense excessive from just the perspective of epistemology (although it's not entirely clear how to flesh that out) to incessantly re-check, it's permissible or acceptable epistemically. Aren't we always epistemically permitted to try to improve our epistemic standing? I'm going to argue that sometimes we are not. At some point the cycle of $m$-checking goes bad even in a purely epistemic sense and even if there are still epistemic gains to be had. To get to this conclusion I want to think more carefully about what happens when we re-check.

I've said that each re-check starts with a question settled or resolved and many end this way as well. What does it take to have a question already settled or answered or resolved? Perhaps knowing the answer is sufficient, but I don't think that it's necessary. A subject who becomes convinced on good, but misleading grounds that the problem is the carburetor 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.

What happens when they check again though? In particular, do they remain believers? I think this could happen, but it doesn't seem to me to be the standard case. In the sort of re-checking we're thinking about subjects move to genuinely “re-ask” some question – 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. This seems to me to indicate a genuine change in view on the matter, typically. These subjects become gripped by doubt and check again. In being gripped by doubt though they give up their belief, at least temporarily, and look to confirm the thing they originally thought once more. A natural though is that these subjects move from

\footnote{Good (1967) offers one sort of (highly influential) suggestion – we can do it all in terms of the expected utilities of the acts one will perform on receiving the potential bits of new information. Of course, we're not always checking in order to act and so it's not clear that this sort of tack will be able to cover all the sorts of cases we want covered.}
believing some answer to \( Q \) to suspending judgment about \( Q \). I want to move forward with this thought. I'll say more about it as we go. My claim for now then is that each re-check, when it's a genuine re-check, comes along with a shift away from belief and back to an inquiring or questioning state and that this questioning state at least involves the re-checker's suspending judgment. If all of this is right then we have 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. Subjects start off believing some \( p \) that they take to answer \( Q \), shift to suspension of judgment about that question, 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. This gives us four key stages in a re-checking cycle: a shift from belief to suspension of judgment, a check, a shift back to belief, and a span of time until the next check. What I want to argue is that a typical case of \( m \)-checking goes epistemically wrong at at least one of these stages and so that a typical case of \( m \)-checking is epistemically defective in some way. These arguments won't impugn most cases of double-checking, leaving it open that that's epistemically fine.

What we'll see is that different cases of \( m \)-checking go epistemically wrong for different reasons. Sometimes the beliefs are epistemically impermissible, sometimes suspending judgment is, sometimes the checks are defective and sometimes information is lost in a way that is epistemically problematic. I'm going to continue using terms like '(un)acceptable', 'defective', 'wrong', '(in)appropriate', and so on when I talk about the normative statuses of various episodes of re-checking. I'm not sure of the extent to which we want to apply more standard normative terms in epistemology – e.g., 'justified' – to these re-checking cycles. When I do talk about the normative statuses of various changes in view or states of mind I'll also call those '(im)permissible'.

3 \( M \)-CHECKING

My plan is to first show why \( m \)-checking has to go epistemically wrong. The view will leave it open that double-checking is often perfectly acceptable epistemically. In the next section I'll say more about double-checking and epistemically acceptable re-checking more generally.
In order to show that a typical case of \( m \)-checking is going to be epistemically unacceptable 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 \( p \) we can talk about a subject's epistemic standing with respect to \( p \). This isn't a matter of whether they believe \( p \) or not (in the binary or degree sense), but rather of matter of something like the strength of their evidence for \( p \). Alternatively, we might think of it as the degree of (propositional) justification a subject has for \( p \). This is a fairly loose characterization, but I hope it's sufficient to sustain the arguments to come.

Now, let's 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 mostly analogous distinction about the repeating cycle of re-checking: as the number of re-checks is mounting are the checker's epistemic circumstances with respect to their answer ultimately improving, ultimately deteriorating or staying mostly stable? My claim will be that in each kind of case, the typical \( m \)-checker is going epistemically wrong (with one rare exception of a potentially acceptable form of \( m \)-checking).

3.1 ULTIMATELY IMPROVING EPISTEMIC POSITION

A natural thought about the \( m \)-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. If \( m \)-checkers perform more and more tests then plausibly their epistemic position is getting better. Here we might imagine the progress as a step function. One manifestation of this sort of pattern is one according to which the \( m \)-checker's epistemic position improves with each check. In this case perhaps the \( m \)-checker performs a good, new test at each check (e.g., they check the stove dial, then the temperature of the element, then the stove lights, then call 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.

My thought about this sort of step-functional \( m \)-checker is that at some point,
after some typically small, but perhaps sometimes larger, number of re-checks they will not be in the sorts of epistemic circumstances in which suspension of judgment about their question is epistemically permissible. That is, after some number of checks their epistemic position with respect to their answer will be so good that the only permissible attitude to have will be belief. If this is right then at some point, the cycle of \( m \)-checking will be epistemically defective because suspending judgment will be epistemically impermissible.\(^5\)

I think the alternative to claiming that suspension of judgment becomes impermissible in these cases involves endorsing an implausible form of ‘epistemic permissivism’. In broad brush permissivism is the denial of ‘uniqueness’ which says that one’s epistemic circumstances (say, total evidence) permit only one doxastic attitude. If permissivism is true then there are at least some possible cases in which one’s epistemic circumstances leave more than one doxastic attitude epistemically permissible (although that doesn’t mean that having both permissible attitudes at the same time is itself permissible).\(^6\)

Let me say more about the worrying sort of permissivism at issue now. The step functional \( m \)-checker starts off a believer. We can assume that belief is epistemically permissible. This means they’re starting off in a fairly strong epistemic position with respect to their believed answer, at least typically. And then this sort of \( m \)-checker does more tests and keeps improving their epistemic standing with respect to their answer with each check. This \( m \)-checker isn’t just getting more evidence with each check but they’re getting more, fairly decisive evidence with each check. The step-functional \( m \)-checker gets the kind of evidence that permits them to re-settle their question – they see the stove dial in the off position, feel the element cold, see the stove light off, and so on. So the step-functional \( m \)-checker quickly gets into an extremely strong epistemic position with respect to their answer. My thought now is that if there are any epistemic circumstances that prohibit suspending judgment, it’s going to be epistemic circumstances like these. And I think there have to be some epistemic circumstances that bar suspending judgment and press us to believe. The alternative is to claim that any epistemic circumstances that permit belief also permit suspension of judgment. And while, as we’ll see in the next section, I think a more moderate form of permissivism is one we should accept, the claim that

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\(^5\)I’m assuming here that if any stage in the cycle of re-checking is epistemically flawed, then we can also say that the cycle is.

\(^6\)See White (2005) for the canonical discussion.
suspension of judgment is permissible in any epistemic circumstances in which belief is (and so I assume any epistemic circumstances whatsoever) is a form of permissivism that's much more difficult to swallow. Aren't there some epistemic circumstances that demand belief rather than suspension of judgment? I think there are and moreover I think the step-functional \( m \)-checker will fairly quickly have to be in epistemic circumstances like those. Let's call these sorts of epistemic circumstances ‘suspension-proof’. It's not that one cannot suspend in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances, but that one ought not to.

An \( m \)-checker's epistemic position can be ultimately improving without improving at every check though. 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 there will be some point at which it becomes suspension-proof with respect to their answer and so their \( m \)-checking will become epistemically unacceptable.

The argument in this section obviously relies heavily on the claim that re-checking involves suspending judgment (as do some further consequences which I'll draw out a bit later). Once I get through the rest of the main argument I'll say more about this connection between checking and suspending.

### 3.2 ULTIMATELY DETERIORATING EPSITEMIC POSITION

In the most straightforward version of this sort of case the re-checker starts off believing \( p \), double-checks their answer, gets evidence against \( p \), re-settles on \( p \), checks on that answer again, gets more evidence that it's the wrong answer, comes to believe \( p \) again, and so on. This is obviously a strange sort of case and I think it's fairly clear that standard machinery in epistemology tells us that \( m \)-checking is epistemically defective in this sort of case as well.

In general, if the \( m \)-checker starts in the sort of epistemic position that permits belief in their answer, but over the course of a series of re-checks that epistemic position deteriorates, then soon enough this \( m \)-checker will no longer be in the sort of epistemic position that permits belief in their answer. Given that one stage of \( m \)-checking involves a shift back to belief in the answer post-check, these beliefs will be impermissible in these cases. Just as improving epistemic circumstances will eventually bar suspension of judgment, deteriorating ones will eventually bar belief, leaving \( m \)-checking into that question epistemically
unacceptable.  

3.3  RELATIVELY STABLE EPISTEMIC POSITION

What happens if an \( m \)-checker's epistemic position is neither improving much nor deteriorating much as the number of checks mounts? In that case we need to think about why there's this sort of relative stability in epistemic standing. I think there are two main sorts of cases that we should consider. The first type of case is one in which the checks themselves simply have no epistemic impact, and the second type of case is one in which the checks do improve the \( m \)-checker's epistemic position, but then something happens in between checks to degrade that epistemic position.  

Let's take the two types of cases in turn.

3.3.1  TYPE 1: NO IMPACT

In this sort of case although the \( m \)-checker is performing some checks those checks have no epistemic impact on their standing with respect to their answers at all. But what could be going on with the checks that they are epistemically inert in this way?

One case like this may be the case in which the re-checker performs the very same test over and over, e.g., they look at the stove dial again and again. Here the test might lead to an epistemic bump at first, but at some point I assume it becomes epistemically idle, offering no further support to the relevant answer. The checks might be defective in other ways as well so that they add nothing epistemically. For instance, the checks might be irrelevant to the answer and so have no epistemic impact there. They might also be more generally defective, e.g., careless or hasty.

But if any of these are the case, then the belief formed as a result of the check will not be permissible. Even if the re-checker starts in the sorts of epistemic circumstances that permit belief, when they check and then form a belief again, I take it that that they are basing their belief on the check or on the result of

\[\text{In fact we might think that this case is worse than this. In this case the } m\text{-checker starts believing } p \text{ (we can assume permissibly) then shifts to suspension of judgment and performs a test that makes their epistemic position with respect to } p \text{ worse, but then re-settles on } p. \text{ There's certainly something strange if not worse about getting evidence against } p \text{ and coming to believe } p \text{ as a result.}\]

\[\text{There's a third kind of case that I'm just ignoring here: the checks lead to deterioration but then something happens in between to improve the situation. I'm not quite sure how to think about this sort of case.}\]
the check. But basing a belief on a faulty or redundant or careless or irrelevant check will not leave the belief so based permissible.

The general thought here is that something has to be going wrong with the checks if they are adding nothing to the checker's epistemic standing. But, my thought is, then the beliefs based on those checks are defective as well and the process epistemically defective.9

One might worry about this claim. If this re-checker was (say) a knower in the lead-up to the re-check then after the check can't they just use the evidence or information they already had and re-settle based on that? I imagine they could, but I'm not sure that this would count as a true re-check (rather than an attempt at re-checking, say). Imagine a subject who knows the stove is off but goes to double-check whether it is. They look at the stove dial, can't really see it well but nonetheless conclude that the stove is off based on the information they already had that it was. I'm not sure whether that counts as a true double-check. For instance, it seems to me that if they then decide to look at the stove dial again in another effort to re-check, that that re-check would count as a second attempt at a double-check rather than a triple-check. This is to say that an m-checker needs to be settling based on the check or test (as well as the evidence they already had, perhaps). But even if you have other evidence that permits belief, settling based (in part) on a bad check is not epistemically acceptable and will leave the belief epistemically defective.10

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9I think that there's an intuitive case to be made in favour of at least some m-checkers' beliefs being epistemically flawed. 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. Say 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 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 take it not.

Why not trust this testimony? Hypothesis: the m-checking subject seems confused about the force of their checks. In each check they settle the question only to reflect and decide that that settling was a mistake. When that happens enough times we'll also think the settling was a mistake.

10Say you have a great deal of evidence that it's termites destroying your balcony. You have enough to make believing permissible, but you don't yet believe. You want to perform one more test to be sure: reading the tea leaves. You read the leaves and they say it's termites and as a result you come to believe that it's termites. Even if you base your belief on the tea leaves and the old, good evidence you had, you've been epistemically remiss here and I don't think that the belief you end up with is perfectly permissible.
3.3.2 TYPE 2: IMPROVEMENT FOLLOWED BY DETERIORATION

I think there are two key sub-types here each offering a different mechanism by which the checker’s epistemic standing deteriorates. The first sort of sub-type is one in which \( m \)-checkers gain standing with each check but then get new evidence that undercuts that gain afterwards prompting them to check again.

This seems to me a very rare case. In this sort of case the \( m \)-checker keeps getting new evidence that wrecks their epistemic standing with respect to their answer, leading them to re-check. And then, in the checks they get enough new information to make re-settling permissible. And then they get more evidence that throws them into doubt. And then a re-check restores their standing. Here it can’t be that this \( m \)-checker’s epistemic position with respect to their answer is continuing to improve or deteriorate otherwise we’re back to one of the earlier types of cases. Rather the picture now has to be one where standing is lost by the acquisition of new evidence and then what’s regained leaves the re-checker mostly no better off than they were. This is a delicate balance. Perhaps this is one of the rare sorts of cases in which \( m \)-checking, for virtually any \( m \), can be epistemically fine.\(^{11}\)

The second sub-type is more common and I think more interesting. An \( m \)-checker’s epistemic standing with respect to their answer can suffer in cases in which they lose evidence in between checks. Here their epistemic standing doesn’t deteriorate due to the acquisition of new information but rather due to information loss. Here the re-checker opens the question and collects new evidence in favour of their answer, but then loses some of that evidence soon after (typically the exact evidence acquired in the re-check although we can imagine cases in which other evidence in favour of the answer is lost). They then check again, but then lose information again afterwards.

This is an important sort of case since some accounts of truly compulsive checking fit this sort of model. In cases of compulsive checking subjects can spend hours checking whether a switch is off or a dial in some position over and over again. I take it that this sort of compulsive checking is the result of genuine pathology.

One common account of what’s going on in cases of compulsive checking is

\(^{11}\)Here’s a case like this. You hear from a reliable source that Joe was at the party. Then someone else (also reliable) tells you that they don’t think he was. You ask yet another person and they report that Joe was there. But then someone else tells you that they don’t think he was, and so on.
that checkers (say) look at the stove dial, come to believe it’s in the off position \((d)\) (or even come to know) and then infer that the stove is off. But then when they reflect on their state with respect to \(d\) they find they don’t have a clear memory impression of the stove dial’s position and as a result lose confidence in \(d\). This prompts them to want to check again – they’re looking for a clear memory impression of \(d\) in order to really believe that the stove is off. And so they look at the dial once more, but then don’t find a clear memory impression after the fact, so they look another time, and this cycle repeats many more times, sometimes for hours on end. It’s been argued that the compulsive re-checking breeds a kind of familiarity with the dial that actually (sadly) makes it harder to recall the details of its position clearly. So their compulsive checking not only doesn’t help their memory impression but may make it more hazy even.\(^{12}\)

An important element here though is that there’s something like a deterioration of epistemic standing in between re-checks. An extreme case of this might be a subject who checks the stove dial, learns \(d\) and comes to believe that the stove is off \((o)\) but then forgets \(d\). Since they want to know \(d\) in order to confirm \(o\) they check the dial again. And then say they come to believe \(d\) again but then forget it soon after. And that cycle keeps repeating. The pathological compulsive checker might not completely forget in between re-checks but their memory loses vivacity in a way that’s sufficient to make it that they don’t want to rely on it.

I’m not sure what sort of normative verdict to render about genuinely compulsive checking. This gets to questions about the relationship between pathology and rationality that I don’t feel well placed to answer. Let’s put these cases of true pathology aside. I do want to say a few things about non-pathological forgetful \(m\)-checkers though.

Certainly a lot of forgetting is thought to be epistemically acceptable or at least excusable.\(^{13}\) That I can’t remember the nineteenth movie I ever saw or what I had for lunch on December 05, 2011 isn’t thought to be any sort of rational failing on my part. Some forgetting does seem to be more clearly unacceptable and a sign of epistemic defect. If it matters to me whether Alice was at the meeting and you tell me but then I forget and then you tell me again but then I forget again and that keeps happening, this does seem epistemically suspect


\(^{13}\)In fact see Michaelian (2011) for the claim that some forgetting is even epistemically virtuous.
to me. Repeated forgetting of information I want or need is not epistemically innocent. In fact in a case like this I think we'll soon suspect that I haven't been properly paying attention to your answer in the first place – that my inquiry is not being carefully done. The analogue in our cases of $m$-checking is then that repeated forgetting of information that the $m$-checker wants and just got is evidence that their checks are not going as they should – that this inquirer is being hasty or incautious or insufficiently attentive. And if the checks are going wrong in these sorts of ways then, as we've already seen, re-settling based on them is not permissible.

So I think that we have good reason to think that the sort of forgetful $m$-checker just described is failing in one of the ways that the other sorts of $m$-checkers we looked at are: their checks are defective – they are not paying sufficiently good attention to the results – and failure to properly check leaves beliefs formed as a result of those checks defective, and so the $m$-checking defective. That said, that we have evidence that the checks are defective doesn't guarantee that they are. Couldn't we have an $m$-checker checking carefully each time but then simply losing some information? Even if we can I don't think this changes the verdict about the cases. As I said, while there’s plenty of memory loss that is epistemically innocent, repeated forgetting of information that a subject wants or needs looks like an epistemic failure. If you care about whether $p$ is true but keep forgetting the answer after you find out whether it is then you certainly seem open to a distinctively epistemic sort criticism and charges of epistemic irresponsibility and even irrationality. If this is right then this $m$-checker too is going epistemically wrong. In between checks they are forgetting information in a way that seems epistemically unacceptable.

This takes us through the three kinds of cases. If the $m$-checker’s epistemic position is improving then suspending judgment will eventually be impermissible and if it’s deteriorating then some of the relevant beliefs will be impermissible. If it’s staying relatively stable I think we can get to a rare case of epistemically acceptable $m$-checking, but otherwise these $m$-checkers are either inquiring badly (leaving the beliefs formed as a result impermissible) or being unacceptably forgetful or both. This covers the range of $m$-checkers and shows that they are typically going epistemically wrong. I want to say more about some of the upshots here, but first I want to say something about double-checking and acceptable or appropriate re-checking in general.
Double-checking is often perfectly acceptable and even laudable from the perspective of epistemology. In fact I'm happy to say even that it's typically epistemically acceptable (although perhaps not always). I don't think there's much of a mystery about why it's often perfectly acceptable epistemic practice. It's completely appropriate from the perspective of epistemology to question our beliefs. That we've closed some inquiry and believe an answer (or just believe without having inquired first even) doesn't mean that inquiry on that matter is over forever. Of course it doesn't. 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. This is simply good epistemic practice. The good epistemic subject doesn't only care about belief formation but cares about epistemic maintenance as well. Double-checking is a central part of that maintenance project. Interestingly, we can now see something about the limits of this maintenance project though. That double-checking may be good epistemic practice doesn't mean that incessantly checking is.

While I've argued that a typical case of m-checking is going to be epistemically problematic at some point, that argument doesn't impugn double-checking. There's no repeated forgetting of essential information or beliefs based on dubious checks and we don't need to see the double-checker as starting in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances. On that last point: of course there could be some subjects who are in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to some unchecked belief. These sorts of believers (and typically knowers) will not be permitted to shift to suspension of judgment. This will give us cases in which even double-checking is not epistemically appropriate. I think this is a nice feature of the view. We might wonder how often we're in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to our unchecked beliefs. The view as it stands can be flexible about this, accommodating different accounts. My own thought is that we should be guided by our intuitions about the extent to which double-checking is epistemically appropriate. It seems to me that double-checking is typically epistemically unproblematic. If that's right

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14 Say a subject knows \( p \). Is there anything they need to check up on? So long as we assume that knowledge is not luminous, that we sometimes know but aren't sure that we do, it seems as though even a knower can reasonably engage in this sort of maintenance project.
then we are not typically in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to our unchecked beliefs.\footnote{It’s natural to wonder what makes some epistemic circumstances suspension-proof. Again, I want to leave this open leaving the account flexible, but here are some thoughts. If double-checking is appropriate in cases in which subjects start off knowing – which I take it it regularly is – then knowing the answer to some question does not make it that one is in suspension-proof circumstances. I’m going to assume that being in the position to know $Q$ is necessary for being in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances with respect to $Q$. What more is required? I don’t have a clear answer here. We might think it’s just a stronger epistemic position where that’s in part a matter of having more or better evidence. Perhaps it’s a matter of being in the position to be sure rather than just know. There’s also something to be said for the thought that it involves being in the position to know or be sure or be aware that one knows. Here the boost in epistemic position (also) puts one in the position to meta-cognize in an important way. This last thought has some intuitive support. I take it that any case in which a subject knows but isn’t in the position to know or be sure whether they do is going to feel like a case in which double-checking isn’t out of order. There is obviously much more to say here (and I’ll say a bit of it in the next section).}

Even if there’s no great mystery about why double-checking is so often acceptable, I think it has some interesting implications for epistemology that I want to bring out. In the lead-up to a double-check the subject has some question already settled or answered, they believe an answer or even know it. Yet it’s epistemically acceptable for them to check again. If the double-checker knows the answer to the question they’re re-checking then we can assume their starting epistemic position is fairly good. If we assume that our beliefs are typically in fairly good epistemic standing then we can make that assumption in general about the double-checker. Does that epistemic standing change before they double-check though? While as we’ve seen, such a subject could receive some piece of evidence that throws them into doubt about their answer, e.g., evidence against the answer or evidence that they somehow went wrong, I assume that in most cases this doesn’t happen. The double-checker becomes anxious about their answer, but that needn’t be because they receive any new information that something has gone wrong. I think this is true of re-checking generally.

So double-checkers and re-checkers generally often re-check without a change in epistemic circumstances. I’ve argued that these re-checks involve a shift to suspension of judgment. So that shift often or even typically happens without a change in epistemic circumstances. It’s typically not because you got new evidence about the stove or your passport (or your fallibility) that you decide to check again. But if double-checking is typically perfectly epistemically acceptable then we should say that that shift from belief to suspension of judgment is typically epistemically permissible. All this seems to get us to
the conclusion that moving from belief to suspension of judgment without a change in epistemic position can be perfectly permissible in these sorts of cases. If this thought is right then I think the acceptability of double-checking means we should accept a mild form of permissivism: one that says that at least some of the epistemic circumstances that permit belief also permit suspension of judgment. Earlier I argued that a more radical form of permissivism – one the said that any epistemic circumstances that permit belief permit suspension of judgment – was implausible. That some re-checks are acceptable without a change in epistemic circumstances though means that a milder form of permissivism is true. The acceptability of double-checking, plus my claims about what happens when we re-check leads us to this milder permissivism.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, I’ve said that double-checking is often or even typically acceptable, which is to say that the epistemic circumstances we are typically in with respect to our unchecked beliefs permit a re-check. Even without a change in epistemic standing. But this means that the kinds of epistemic circumstances that we are often or even typically in with respect to our unchecked beliefs permit suspension of judgment. We are regularly in the sorts of epistemic circumstances with respect to our beliefs that permit suspension of judgment. But I don’t think that we want to say that that’s because in each of these cases (or even many of them) there is something wrong with the starting belief. Again, I take it that most of those starting beliefs are just fine epistemically speaking. But so is questioning them in the relevant way. So from the thought that double-checking is typically epistemically acceptable, we get the thought that the epistemic circumstances we are typically in with respect to our unchecked beliefs are permissive – they also permit suspension of judgment.

A final observation. I’ve said that the epistemic circumstances we are typically in with respect to our unchecked beliefs permit both belief and suspension of judgment. There’s more though. Re-checking as I’ve framed it involves a subject changing their mind. One of these mind changes is a shift from belief to suspension of judgment in the lead-up to the check. Not only are both attitudes permissible in the relevant sorts of cases, but so is a shift from belief to suspension of judgment. And that shift is permissible, it seems, without a change in

\textsuperscript{16}In some form or another “permissivism” is a fairly popular position. I’m not sure that I know of anyone who endorses exactly this form, but I think many of the arguments in favour of some other forms of permissivism easily bring this version along. For some of those arguments see, e.g., Kelly (2013) and Schoenfield (2013).
epistemic standing.

There is certainly a feeling in some parts of epistemology that changing one’s view without new information coming in is never permitted. Many claim, for instance, that one can only change one’s view by conditionalizing on new evidence. I don’t think this can be right in general, and the acceptability of double-checking brings out at least one way in which one can change one’s view on some question without a change in epistemic circumstances. In at least some cases of double-checking subjects shift away from believing and to suspending judgment without any new evidence or change in epistemic circumstances. We can – and without irrationality – become gripped by doubt and change from a settled attitude like belief to a questioning one like suspension of judgment without a change in evidence or epistemic standing.\(^{17}\)

5 CHECKING AND SUSPENDING

I’ve argued that the \(m\)-checker is typically impermissibly suspending judgment or impermissibly believing, or impermissibly forgetting but the mere double-checker doesn’t need to be doing any of those things.

I want to focus on one kind of case discussed and some of its implications. I argued that when a re-checker’s epistemic position is ultimately improving \(m\)-checking is epistemically inappropriate because it involves suspending judgment which eventually becomes impermissible as the re-checker’s epistemic position improves.

This argument relies on a number of premises. First, that there are suspension-proof epistemic circumstances, second that we can (somewhat easily) get into them – that they aren’t reserved for gods or robots, and third that re-checking always involves suspending judgment. I’m not going to say too much more about the first two. It’s commonplace in epistemology to talk about requirements to believe when faced with certain kinds of compelling evidence. With a few more assumptions (e.g., if you’re required to believe \(p\) in epistemic circumstances \(C\) then you’re not permitted to suspend judgment about \(Q\) in

\(^{17}\)Can the subject switch back to belief without new evidence? The following seems clearly permissible to me: you become doubtful about your answer to some question and so you shift to suspension of judgment and review the evidence you already have. You come to think it supports your original answer and so you re-settle based on the same evidence as before. In an important sense you have no new evidence here.
C, where \( p \) is an answer to \( Q \), this gets us to the thought that sometimes we shouldn’t suspend judgment.

The claim that checking involves suspending judgment though seems controversial and is now bearing a heavy load so I want to say more about it. Before I do more to defend this claim about checking and suspending, I want to make clear what I think the claim (along with the others I mentioned in this section) tells us about the norms of inquiry.

My claim is that once we perform a number of good and careful re-checks we are going to be in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances. And this will mean that further checks are not epistemically appropriate. I want to try to be clear about what this last claim does and does not tell us.

First, it does not say that epistemology forbids you from (say) walking over to the stove and looking at the light again. It is not the case that any time one walks over to the stove and looks at the light one is genuinely checking on whether the stove is on. When one genuinely checks whether the stove is on one is genuinely inquiring into that question. This means that one is in some sense asking or trying to resolve the question. Walking over to the stove and looking at it does not need to involve asking whether it’s on (or asking anything at all). And the claim that further checks are not permitted 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.

What it does say though is that after some number of good and careful re-checks you are not permitted to suspend judgment again. And that since a genuine re-check involves suspending judgment those further re-checks would be epistemically inappropriate or unacceptable. So what the argument here does purport to show is that after some number of good and careful re-checks epistemology tells you not to inquire further into the relevant matter.

Of course I haven’t said how many good and careful re-checks is too many. As it stands the view I’m proposing can be filled in in different ways at this point – perhaps suspension-proof epistemic circumstances are somewhat rare and so it takes a lot of re-checks to reach them or perhaps they are far more commonplace (for what it’s worth I don’t think that they are rare).

What more can we say about these sorts of suspension-proof epistemic circumstances? I don’t think that certainty about one’s answer is either necessary or sufficient for some epistemic circumstances to be suspension-proof. Certainty
is a matter of one’s psychological commitment to the answer. I also don’t think that it’s necessary for being in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances that one’s epistemic standing be as good as it can get (if that’s even possible and whatever it could amount to). If one’s epistemic standing with respect to $p$ can be bettered I’ll say that that standing is ‘improvable’. So my thought is that at least some improvable epistemic circumstances are suspension-proof. I assume that the $m$-checker who is in suspension-proof epistemic circumstances is also typically in improvable epistemic circumstances; that is, another check might make their epistemic position even stronger than it is. Nonetheless checking again is not acceptable. And this unacceptability is purely epistemic. This is to say that in these cases continuing to inquire in these ways is not epistemically appropriate.$^{18}$

So we’re left with a fairly significant claim about epistemic rules for continued inquiry. My claim is that in a range of cases epistemology declares further inquiry inappropriate even though the subjects in those case could improve their epistemic standing by inquiring further. In some of these cases even though you can expect an epistemic gain, epistemology effectively bars you from trying to get it.

From this perspective there is quite a bit of pressure on the claim that in genuinely re-checking subjects suspend judgment. What more can be said in defence of this claim? We can start here. Recall, we’re interested in cases in which subjects are genuinely re-investigating or re-inquiring into some matter. As we’ve seen, re-checking in this sense isn’t a matter of merely walking over to the stove and turning your head or touching your back pocket. For those sorts of actions to count as re-checks in the sense we’re interested in – for them to count as genuine inquiries – they have to be actions that are grounded in or perhaps motivated by genuine questioning.

What does this amount to? Here’s a way to think about it. When you’re checking whether the stove is off again (in the relevant sense) you’re genuinely wondering whether it’s on or off or genuinely curious about that. But as we’ve

$^{18}$Should we say that checking again or inquiring further is itself epistemically impermissible (rather than just epistemically unacceptable or inappropriate)? If one endorsed the following principle then the move from the impermissibility of suspension of judgment in these cases to the impermissibility of continued inquiry would be straightforward: if $\varphi$-ing necessarily involves $\psi$-ing then if $\psi$-ing is impermissible, $\varphi$-ing is. I’m very happy with a principle like this although some may be less so. One might argue though that even without the general principle, we can make the relevant inference in this specific case.
seen re-checkers come into their re-checks already settled on some answer to their focal question. 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 about whether the stove is on or 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 whether the stove is off, but I’m wondering whether it is.'). This is to say that wondering or being curious about some question isn’t a state that is somehow cordoned off from one’s take on the answer to that question. When one shifts to re-inquiring into a question in this sense, 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 pulls one away from that thought.

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 wanting more and more evidence, but we need to think of their attitude with respect to their question/answer as itself changing. 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 needs to have them shifting their view about their answer.

Obviously 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? They move from believing to not believing, and in particular to suspending judgment. 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 answer; 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 in to those details, I simply want to point out that I don’t think this other sort of tack does much to avoid the sort of consequence we’re focused one here – that sometimes even though epistemic gains can be made, epistemology tells us to stop inquiring.

Imagine a re-checker who starts with some credence x in their answer p. x
should be quite high, since we’re thinking about subjects who start off knowing or at least fully believing (or who are more generally settled with respect to $p$). We can assume that having a credence of $x$ in $p$ is permissible. Say this subject becomes gripped by doubt and shifts to some credence $y$ in $p$ such that $y$ is less than $x$. Now we can ask: given this subject’s epistemic standing is $y$ also permissible? Again, perhaps in many cases it will be. But what happens once they’ve checked many more times? Again, unless we endorse an incredibly strong form of permissivism, we’ll want to say that at some point the relevant drop in credence is not permissible.\(^\text{19}\) In general, we need to see $m$-checkers as changing their view about their answer somehow. And I think that we’re going to find that unless we endorse ultra-permissive views about which of those attitudes are permitted in the various epistemic circumstances, the lesson here is going to be very much the same.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

I argued that the cycle of re-checking could be helpfully broken up into four key stages – a shift from belief to suspension of judgment, a check or test, a shift back to belief, and then a span of time until the next check. I’ve argued that incessant checking breaks down as a matter of epistemology at at least one of these places. As we’ve just seen thinking about just why gives us some insight into some epistemic norms of inquiry. Even when all one’s checks are good and information is not lost – and even when there’s more evidence and information to be gained on some matter – epistemology sometimes declares further inquiry inappropriate.

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

\(^{19}\)This is a fairly flat-footed version of the suggestion that we turn to credences, but I think we’ll see much the same outcome even with more subtle versions. Unless we endorse implausible forms of permissivism epistemology is sometimes going to press us to stop inquiring, even if there are still potential epistemic gains to be made.
tests put them in the sorts of epistemic circumstances that permit belief, but also permit suspension of judgment, then further inquiry can still be acceptable given what I’ve argued 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 permissible, I think we should also say that further inquiry is not appropriate from a purely epistemic perspective even if there are epistemic gains to be has in inquiring further.

So thinking about when and why epistemic circumstances become suspension-proof generally can give us some guidance about when epistemology tells us to stop inquiring and settle a question. Leaving aside the more general case, I think in the specific case of *m*-checking, thinking about suspension-proof epistemic circumstances helps us to say when continuing to check is not good epistemic practice.

This conclusion may be 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 certainty, but something more modest like knowledge. But many of those cases in which you know in inquiry are cases in which your epistemic position is improvable. In fact many of the cases in which you’re fully aware that you know the answer 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 you’re aware of that). If the goal of inquiry is something you 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 your epistemic position. It isn’t just practical constraints that sometimes demand we close our inquiries while still in improvable epistemic circumstances, but epistemology too can insist we stop.²⁰

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