Checking and the Argument from Inquiry

Abstract

In his recent book, *Knowing and Checking*, Guido Melchior argues that, when we attempt to check whether p, we tend to think that we do not know p. Melchior then uses this assumption to explain a number of puzzles about knowledge. One outstanding question for Melchior's account, however, is why this tendency exists. After all, Melchior himself argues that checking is not necessary for knowing, so why would we think that we fail to know that p when we are in the midst of checking that p? I will explore one such suggestion for why this occurs, arguing that the connection between checking and inquiry can shed light on the impact that checking has on knowing.

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Knowing and Checking

In his recent book, *Knowing and Checking*, Guido Melchior sets out to explain a number of puzzles about knowledge via an analysis of checking. According to Melchior, we can give an account of checking using a sensitivity principle:

> S checks whether p is true via method M only if:
>
> (1) S uses M with the intention of determining whether p is true, and
>
> (2) In the nearest possible worlds where p is false and where M is used to determine whether p is true, M does not indicate that p is true.[1]

There are a number of similarities between condition (2) and Robert Nozick's sensitivity account of knowledge. According to Nozick, S knows that p only if the following sensitivity principle holds:

> If p were false and S were to use M to arrive at a belief whether (or not) p, then S wouldn't believe, via M, that p.[2]

If we use the standard semantics for counterfactuals, then Nozick's sensitivity condition is very similar to (2), as both instruct us to see how things are in the nearest possible world where p is false. Melchior's principle is framed in terms of the indications of a particular method, while Nozick's principle is described in terms of what S believes, with the assumption that S is forming their belief based on the indication of M.

Even though sensitivity has fallen into disrepute when it comes to knowledge, Melchior defends the view that sensitivity can still be of use when it comes to an account of checking. Take, for example, Ernest Sosa's trash chute case, an example of insensitive knowledge:

> **Trash Chute**
>
> "On my way to the elevator I release a trash bag down the chute from my high rise condo. Presumably I know my bag will soon be in the basement. But what if, having been released, it still (incredibly) were not to arrive there? That presumably would be because it had been snagged somehow in the chute on the way down (an incredibly rare occurrence), or some such happenstance. But none such could affect my predictive belief as I release it, so I would still predict that the bag would soon arrive in the basement. My belief seems not to be sensitive, therefore, but constitutes knowledge anyhow, and can correctly be said to do so."[3]

This case seems to be an obvious counterexample to a sensitivity account of knowledge. Were the bag to become snagged in the chute, our protagonist

[1] See Mechior (2019), pp. 30-41. On page 30, Melchior simply leaves condition (2) as "M is an appropriate method with respect to p", explaining later that what it takes to be appropriate is to be a sensitive method, the condition (2) that I have supplied here.

[2] See Nozick (1981), p. 179.

[3] See Sosa (1999), pp. 145-146.

would continue to believe that it made it to the trash bin at the bottom, making their belief insensitive. Nevertheless, it also seems like they know that the trash made it all the way through the chute, showing that satisfying Nozick's sensitivity principle is not necessary for knowledge.

Suppose, however, that we ask a slightly different question. Instead of wondering whether our protagonist knows that the trash made it to the bottom of the chute, what if we asked instead whether they *checked* that the trash made it to the bottom of the chute. In this case, the answer seems to be no. Beyond throwing the bag in the garbage chute, they did nothing else to check whether or not it had gotten snagged on the way down. On the other hand, if they had used a sensitive method like going down to the basement and looking to see whether their trash was in the bin, then it seems right to say that they checked whether their garbage made it to the bottom of the chute. Melchior's explanation for this difference is that "sensitivity is necessary for checking while it is plausibly not necessary for knowing."[4] It is possible that someone can know that their trash has reached the bottom of the chute without also checking whether it has because only checking requires using a sensitive method.

With his sensitivity account of checking in hand, Melchior then turns to consider a number of knowledge paradoxes, explaining why they are puzzling by appealing to slight differences between checking and knowing. One of the paradoxes that Melchior attempts to explain is the skeptical paradox. Where *sh* is a skeptical hypothesis, like that I am being deceived by an evil demon, Melchior formulates the paradox as a conflict between three plausible claims:

The Skeptical Paradox

Claim 1: We have knowledge of the external world.

Claim 2: We do not know that the skeptical hypothesis, $\neg sh$, is false.

Claim 3: If we have knowledge of the external world, then we know that $\neg sh$.[5]

Claim 1 seems obvious, that we know a great many things about the external world. And if we have knowledge of the external world, then in keeping with Claim 3, we know we are not being deceived by an evil demon. Claim 2, however, calls this knowledge into question. Skeptical hypotheses are formulated such that our beliefs in their denials are insensitive, i.e. if the skeptical hypotheses were true, we would still believe that they are false. If there were no physical, external world and I was being deceived by an evil demon, I would continue to think that there was a physical external world.

If Claim 1 and 3 seem plausible, then why are we tempted by Claim 2? Why do we think that we don't know that skeptical hypotheses are false? After all,

[4] See Melchior (2019), p. 3.
[5] Ibid, p. 215.

we just pointed out that knowledge doesn't require sensitivity. Why should it make a difference if our external world beliefs are not sensitive? Melchior's answer to this question is that, when we consider if we know whether a skeptical hypothesis is false, we enter a checking context, a context that sends us looking for a sensitive method:

> **KSAC**
>
> "In contexts of checking, when we raise the question whether p (or an alternative q) is true and deliberate about methods for settling this question, we tend to think that we do not know that p via strongly insensitive methods."[6]

According to Melchior, when we raise the question whether a particular proposition p is true, we tend to think that we need a checking method in order to know whether p. This tendency then also applies when we consider skeptical hypotheses, sending us looking for methods whereby we can check whether those hypotheses are true or false. As we have discussed, though, in order to check whether p is true, we must use a method that is sensitive to the truth of p, and skeptical hypotheses are unique in that we have no methods that are sensitive to their truth or falsity. Thus, since we cannot check whether a skeptical hypothesis is true, we tend to think that Claim 2 is correct.

Melchior then applies this approach to a number of other knowledge paradoxes as well. For instance, Melchior argues that **KSAC** can explain why knowledge closure puzzles arise. Take Dretske's famous zebra case. S is looking at a zebra at the zoo, but they cannot inspect the zebra closely. In such a case, each of the following seems plausible:

> (i) S knows that the animal in the pen is a zebra.
>
> (ii) S does not know that the animal in the pen is not a painted mule.
>
> (iii) S knows that, if the animal in the pen is a zebra, then it is not a painted mule.[7]

Here we have another conflict that is structurally similar to **The Skeptical Paradox**. Even though it seems plausible that (i) and (iii) are true, (ii) nevertheless seems true as well, forming an inconsistent triad. This case differs, though, from the **The Skeptical Paradox** in that there are methods for checking whether the zebra is a painted mule. However, because the method that S is currently using is not sensitive to whether the animal is a painted mule, Melchior's explanation remains the same. When S considers whether the animal could be a pained mule, they enter a checking context, but they have not yet used a sensitive method to determine whether the animal is not a painted mule. By **KSAC**, this creates a situation in which they think that they do not know that the animal in the pen is a zebra.[8]

[6] Ibid, p. 142.

[7] This case, originally detailed by Dretske (1970), is adapted by Melchior (2019), p. 159.

[8] Melchior also uses **KSAC** to explain paradoxes involving stakes (p. 150) and bootstrap-

The Argument from Inquiry

One outstanding question for Melchior's account is why, when we are in a checking context, we think that we do not know. This is one of the central claims of *Knowing and Checking* – without it, Melchior cannot explain why the sensitivity of checking would have any consequences for knowledge. Surprisingly, Melchior has very little to say about why **KSAC** is true. How could it be that, even though sensitivity is not necessary for knowledge, "we think in these contexts that knowing that p requires checking that p?"[9] In the rest of this paper, I will explore some possibilities for why we believe we lack knowledge when we are checking. Checking is a form of inquiry, and many have argued that knowing and inquiring are incompatible, raising the possibility that **KSAC** can be supported by recent literature on the nature of inquiry.

According to Sextus Empiricus, there is something wrong with inquiring while knowing. After all, don't we inquire in order to know? If we already know that p, what's the point of inquiring further? Consider the following passage, which Jan Wieland calls Sextus' **Argument from Inquiry**:[10]

> **The Argument from Inquiry**
>
> "Dogmatists are precluded from inquiry. For inquiring about objects and states of affairs is not inconsistent in those who agree that they do not know how these things are in nature, but only in those who think they have accurate knowledge of them, since for the latter the inquiry has already reached its end, as they think, whereas for the former the supposition on which every inquiry is based still holds – namely, that they have not already found out the facts." (*PH*, 2.11)

In this passage, Sextus argues that there is something inconsistent about inquiring while taking oneself to know. The goal of inquiry is knowledge, but if someone thinks that they have already achieved this goal, as the dogmatists do, then there is nothing left to inquire about.[11]Why inquire after you have already discovered the facts?

Sextus' thesis, that there is something inconsistent about inquiring while taking oneself to know, is strengthened by the fact that it seems strange to both claim knowledge that p while continuing to inquire whether p. Take, for example, the oddity of (1) through (3), all statements that claim knowledge in the midst of

ping (p. 193). Because these solutions are all similar in spirit to Melchior's explanation of the skeptical paradox, my points in the rest of this paper can be applied to these other paradoxes as well.

[9]See Melchior (2019), p. 145.

[10]See Wieland (2014).

[11]Those who argue that knowledge is the aim of inquiry include Hannon (2019); Kappel (2010); Kelp (2011), (2014), (2021a), (2021b); Kvanvig (2009); Millar (2011); Rysiew (2012); Sartwell (1991) and (1992); Whitcomb (2017); and van Elswyk and Sapir (2021), amongst others.

ongoing inquiry:[12]

(1) #I know that the patient has cancer, but I will investigate whether he has cancer

(2) #I know that it is raining, but I must learn whether it is raining

(3) #I know that we turn left here, but let me look at the map to see if we turn left here

All of (1)-(3) seem strange, if not downright contradictory, reinforcing Sextus' point that there is something incompatible between knowing and continuing to inquire. This tension is only heightened by similar judgments about knowledge and the interrogative attitudes. Inquiring is often accompanied by interrogative attitudes like wondering whether p, deliberating whether p, contemplating whether p, or being curious whether p.[13] However, adopting an interrogative attitude towards p while taking oneself to know p can be just as puzzling as (1)-(3):

(4) #I know that the door is locked, but I wonder whether the door is locked

(5) #I know that the stove is off, but I'm curious: Is the stove off?

(6) #Yes, I know that 12 + 14 = 26, but I'm contemplating: Does 12 + 14 = 26?

With (4)-(6), we see that it is strange to both claim to know that p and still have an interrogative attitude towards p, deepening the conflict between inquiring and knowing. If the interrogative attitudes typically accompany inquiry, but those same attitudes seem incompatible with knowledge, then perhaps inquiry itself is incompatible with knowledge.

One theory that hopes to explain why statements like (1)-(3) and (4)-(6) seem strange is that there is a normative conflict between knowing and continuing to inquire:

Ignorance Norm

If one knows that p, then one ought not inquire into p[14]

According to the **Ignorance Norm**, a person should stop investigating into p once they know that p. This is closely linked to the goal of inquiry. If the goal of inquiry is to come to know, then what sense does it make to continue inquiring once you have already achieved that goal? Similar norms have been advocated for the interrogative attitudes. Jane Friedman, for example, thinks

[12] Those who point out the tension between knowing and continuing to inquire include Armour (2011), p. 673; Fantl (2018), p. 142; Fantl and McGrath (2012) and (2014); Friedman (2013), (2017), (2019a), (2019b); and van Elswyk and Sapir (2021).

[13] See Friedman (2013), (2017), (2019a), (2019b).

[14] For authors who defend versions of the **Ignorance Norm**, see Friedman (2017) and (2019b), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021), and Whitcomb (2017), amongst others.

that "one ought not inquire into/have an interrogative attitude towards [a question] at t and believe [an answer to that question],"[15] holding that someone should not both know p while taking up an interrogative stance towards the question whether p.

The **Ignorance Norm** is not the only route to explaining the apparent conflict between knowing and inquiring. One might hold that there is an even deeper, metaphysical conflict between knowledge and inquiry, or that there is some kind of normative or metaphysical tension between believing and inquiring. The full range of options is pictured in Figure 1:

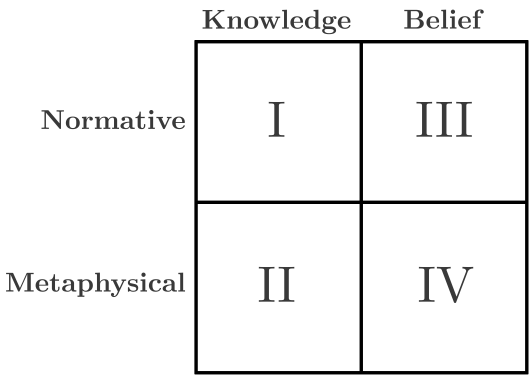

Figure 1: Conflicts with Inquiry

Quadrant (I) represents the **Ignorance Norm**. Along with the **Ignorance Norm**, there might be a metaphysical conflict between knowledge and inquiry (II), a normative conflict between belief and inquiry (III), or a metaphysical conflict between belief and inquiry (IV).

These positions are not meant to be mutually exclusive, as all have the potential to explain the apparent tension between knowledge and inquiry. Positions (I) and (II) do that fairly straightforwardly, maintaining that there is either a normative or metaphysical inconsistency between knowing and continuing to inquire. Because belief is necessary for knowledge, positions (III) and (IV) can also explain the clash between knowing that p and continuing to inquire whether p. If it is not metaphysically possible or normatively permissible to both believe and inquire, then this will also create a metaphysical or normative conflict between knowing and inquiring. All of these views find defenders in the literature on inquiry. Millson (2020) defends (III), while Kelp (2021a), p. 53, and (2021b), p. 368, and McGrath (2021), n. 37, advocate for (IV). Friedman (2017), (2019a), and (2019b) discusses both (III) and (IV), holding that inquiring whether p requires suspending on p (a version of III), but then going on to argue that believing p and simultaneously suspending on p is irrational

[15] See Friedman (2019b), p. 303.

(a position falling in quadrant IV). Armour-Garb (2011) defends (II), and van Elswyk and Sapir (2021) argue for (I) over (III), contending the knowledge is the weakest epistemic state incompatible with inquiry.

What does all of this have to do with checking? The first thing to note is that checking is a paradigmatic form of inquiry. In the evolving literature on inquiry, checking is regularly discussed, and a number of authors apply the **Ignorance Norm** to checking, arguing that inquirers should never check if they already know.[16] Not only is checking often treated as a form of inquiry, but like with (1)-(3), we can also use checking to create assertions that are borderline paradoxical:

(7) #I know that the patient has cancer, but I will check whether he has cancer

(8) #I know that it is raining, but I'm going to check whether it is raining

(9) #I know that we turn left here, but let me check whether we turn left here

As with (1)-(3), (7)-(9) seem strange, if not outright contradictory. Why check if it's raining if you already know that it is? Like with inquiry more generally, a ready explanation is that the goal of checking is to know. Thus, once someone thinks that they know that p, there is no further point to checking that p.

If checking is a form of inquiring, then positions (I)-(IV) apply to checking as well. One either shouldn't check if they already know (on views I and III), or it is impossible to check if one already knows (on II and IV). This also supplies us with an explanation for why **KSAC** is true. If checking whether p is either normatively or metaphysically in conflict with knowing that p, then it makes sense that we think we do not know when we enter a checking context. If the normative view is correct, then to the extent that it seems like we should check that p, this will also suggest that we do not actually know that p, for if we knew that p then this would generate the sense that we need not check. If the metaphysical view is correct, then to the extent that our checking seems authentic, then this would suggest that we do not know that p, as it would not be possible to actually check while knowing. Thus, if checking is a form of inquiry and there is a conflict between knowing and inquiring, then we can explain why **KSAC** is true.

Are Knowing and Inquiring Really Inconsistent?

A potential worry for our explanation of the connection between knowing and checking is that the **Ignorance Norm** might be too strict. Isn't it permissible to inquire once someone already knows? After all, there might be other goals associated with inquiry besides knowing. Even if I already know that p, I might

[16] See Armour-Garb (2011), p. 670; Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), p. 587; Friedman (2017), p. 131; and Friedman (2019a), p. 86.

want to confirm that p, verify that p, double check that p, make sure that p, or corroborate that p.[17] Falbo (Forthcoming) and Woodard (2022) make the case that inquiry aims, not just at knowledge, but at epistemic improvement more generally.

When we make it clear that we are seeking further epistemic goods other than knowledge, then it does not seem inconsistent to take oneself to know and continue to inquire, as it did with (1)-(3) and (7)-(9). Take, for example, the following examples of inquiring while knowing:

> (10) I know that I locked the car, but I'm double checking just to be certain
>
> (11) I know that the defendant was at the hotel on the night in question, but I want to check the security cameras to confirm
>
> (12) I know that we turn left to get to the hospital, but let me look at the map to make sure

In (10)-(12), we can see that it does not always sound paradoxical to both take oneself to know and continue to inquire.[18] If I want to become more confident that p, gain further justification for believing that p, or become certain that p, then it seems permissible to continue to inquire whether p even after one knows that p.

If knowing and inquiring are compatible, this might make trouble for Melchior's proposed **KSAC** principle. After all, if further inquiry and knowledge are perfectly consistent, then an activity like checking that p might also be compatible with knowing that p, leaving us once again without an explanation for why those who check whether p might think that they do not know that p. In response to this potential concern, it is important to point out that we are not necessarily trying to explain why checking is, in fact, incompatible with knowing. Instead, our task is to explain why we often have the *intuition* that checking is incompatible with knowing. **KSAC** does not say that knowing and checking cannot coexist, but rather says that we have the tendency to think they cannot. One potential explanation, of course, for this intuition is something like the **Ignorance Norm**, but even if the **Ignorance Norm** is false, we can still give other plausible explanations for this intuition.

Another possible explanation of the oddity of (1)-(3) and (7)-(9) is that knowledge is the most commonplace goal of inquiry. Typically, knowing the answer is enough to settle the questions we are interested in, and, of the many things that

[17] Against the **Ignorance Norm**, Falbo (2021) argues that confirming that p is compatible with knowing that p, Woodard (Forthcoming) defends the rationality of double checking while knowing, and Beddor (manuscript) points out that inquiry can be aimed at becoming certain that p.

[18] For those who defend cases like these, see Falbo (Forthcoming) and Woodard (2022) and (Forthcoming).

we know, there are very few that we need to confirm or double check. If most inquiries halt at knowledge, though, then it may be surprising when a select few inquiries proceed past that point, surprising enough to make statements like (1)-(3) and (7)-(9) hard to make sense of without further information. When we are given that further information though, like in (10)-(12), then we can see that (1)-(3) and (7)-(9) need not be contradictory after all, leaving room for the further goals of inquiry.[19] This solution explains why (1)-(3) and (7)-(9) are puzzling without also being committed to the **Ignorance Norm**.

If the above explanation is correct, that (1) through (3) sound inconsistent because knowledge is the most common goal of inquiry, then we can also use this to explain **KSAC**. The reason that we have the tendency to think we do not know when we are checking is because knowledge is the most common aim of inquiry. Any situation where we feel that it is warranted to check whether p is therefore one where we doubt whether we know that p. This solution means that the intuitions associated with **KSAC** can be misleading, but Melchior is open to the possibility that these intuitions are false, saying that "**KSAC** is a claim about our knowledge intuitions, not about whether these intuitions are true."[20] This opens up the possibility that a person could know that a skeptical hypothesis is false but still not think that they know because they are unable to check whether that hypothesis is false.

Conclusion

Knowing and Checking explores several important issues, providing an account of checking, charting the connections between checking and knowing, and further investigating the role of sensitivity within epistemology. In this paper, I have attempted to survey some of the deeper reasons why knowing and checking might be connected through principles like **KSAC**, bringing recent work on inquiry to bear on Melchior's groundbreaking work on checking. I am interested to hear what Melchior thinks of these possible strategies for developing his view, and how he sees his work interacting with discussions of inquiry more generally.

[19] For this suggestion, that the infelicity of (1)-(3) can be explained by the fact that knowledge is the most common aim of inquiry, see Woodard (Forthcoming).

[20] See Melchior (2019), p. 144.

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