Inquiring and Making Sure

Eliran Haziza

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Abstract. It can be rational to inquire into what you already know, as cases of double-checking suggest. But, I argue, this is compatible with a knowledge aim of inquiry. In general, it can be rational to pursue an aim you've already achieved, and inquiry is no different. In particular, I argue that to double-check what you already know is to make sure you have knowledge, and that is still to aim at knowledge.

1 Introduction

It can be rational to inquire into what you already know, but inquiry still aims at knowledge. Or so I will argue in this paper.

It's a common sense idea that when one inquirers, one aims to know something. I will understand this claim as follows:

K-Aim If S rationally inquires into Q, S aims to know the answer to Q.[1]

K-Aim is often formulated in terms of what inquiry, rather than inquiring agents, aims at. But that is probably best understood metaphorically, and it makes more sense to talk about what inquirers aim at.[2] Talk of the aims of inquirers can be understood in terms of certain mental states, such as desires and intentions, that inquirers have. I'll often therefore talk about what inquirers want, though I don't mean to commit to a particular thesis about what it means for an agent to aim at something.

[1] Versions of K-Aim are defended in Whitcomb (2010, 2017), Kelp (2011, 2014, 2021), Rysiew (2012), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021), and Haziza (2022, 2023), among others.

[2] A similar point is made in Falbo (forthcoming).

I've formulated K-Aim as a normative claim, as a claim about what rational inquirers do. Perhaps a descriptive version of K-Aim is also defensible. That is the stronger claim that all inquirers aim at knowledge. I'm open to this idea, though I'll stick to the normative version of K-Aim here.

K-Aim is challenged by the thought that it's sometimes rationally permissible to inquire into a question to which you already know the answer. Plausibly, knowledge doesn't require absolute certainty. You may know that you locked your door, without being absolutely certain that you did, and you may want to double-check that the door is locked. Double-checking that your door is locked seems rationally permissible in such a case. Thus:

> **Rational Double-Checking** In some cases, it's rationally permissible to double-check that p even if you know that p.

Since double-checking is a kind of inquiring, Rational Double-Checking seems in tension with K-Aim: how can rational inquirers always aim at knowledge if they can rationally inquire when they already know? Indeed, philosophers who have argued for Rational Double-Checking have taken it to be incompatible with K-Aim. They have thus sought alternative aims for inquiry.[3] I will argue, however, that K-Aim and Rational Double-Checking are perfectly compatible. In fact, I'll argue, K-Aim helps explain why double-checking what you already know can be rational.

In the next section, I present the main arguments in favor of Rational Double-Checking and for its incompatibility with K-Aim. Then, in §3, I argue that in general it can be rational to pursue an already attained aim, so it's a mistake to take Rational Double-Checking to be incompatible with K-Aim. Moreover, while Rational Double-Checking is incompatible with an ignorance norm of inquiry, that norm doesn't follow from K-Aim. In §4, I develop these ideas further in terms of what I call *making sure*. In §5, I argue that double-checking should be understood as a particular kind of making sure: when you double-check you make sure that you know. I return to the aim of inquiry and conclude in §6.

[3] See, e.g., Archer (2021), Falbo (2021, forthcoming), Woodard (2022, forthcoming), and Beddor (ms).

2 Double-checking

Double-checking is something we often do: we double-check that the car is locked, that we filled out a form correctly, that we got the time of an appointment right. Double-checking is a species of inquiry. To double-check that p is to inquire whether p when you already have a belief or some degree of credence as to whether p.[4]

So defined, double-checking need not involve knowledge. You can double-check that your car is locked when you *think* it's locked but aren't sure—you think you just locked it but you realize you don't really know. Such cases of double-checking are plausibly rational.

Rational Double-Checking states that it may be rational to double-check that p even if you already *know* that p. My aim in this paper is not to defend Rational Double-Checking, but only to argue that it's compatible with K-Aim. So I'll just assume it to be true. But it's important to see why one might accept it. The arguments for Rational Double-Checking are based on the following sort of cases:

> Deming is quite confident that she locked the door behind her when she left for work. Indeed, she knows that she did. However, she decides to double-check that she locked the door by walking back to the door and trying to open it, just to be sure.[5]

> Evelyn is an expert surgeon. She has spent the morning in carefully studying her patient's file and knows that it's the left kidney that needs to be removed. Prior to scrubbing in, she decided to double-check her patient's file, one last time, just to be sure that it's the left kidney.[6]

Intuitively, both Deming and Evelyn are doing something that's rationally permissible. Deming's belief that the door is closed is good enough to constitute

[4] See Friedman (2019, 3) and Woodard (forthcoming, 3) for a similar definition of double-checking. Woodard adds the condition that S has not forgotten having formed an attitude toward p.

[5] Woodard (forthcoming, 7).

[6] Falbo (forthcoming, 6). The example is based on one from Brown (2008).

knowledge, yet it may not be maximally certain. By double-checking, she retains her knowledge and increases her degree of certainty. The same goes for Evelyn.

The cases are easily multiplied.[7] A student just finished answering all the questions on her exam. She studied well enough to know that each answer is correct. Before turning in the exam, she checks her answers once more, just to be sure, which seems rational to do.

Such cases support Rational Double-Checking. But they've also been taken to show that K-Aim is false. Falbo (forthcoming), for example, writes:

> [If K-Aim were true], Evelyn would be engaged in superfluous inquiry, trying to achieve a goal that she had already accomplished. (6)

> Given that defenders of [K-Aim] are committed to an incompatibility between knowledge and inquiry, they are forced to either deny that Evelyn knows that it's the left kidney while she's inquiring, or to claim that she isn't engaged in genuine inquiry. Both lines of response are implausible. (10)

Instead, Falbo (forthcoming) and Woodard (forthcoming) argue, inquirers like Deming and Evelyn seek something beyond knowledge. Given, as is plausible, that knowledge doesn't entail absolute certainty, inquirers may know yet seek a higher degree of certainty. Indeed, it's natural to say that we want to double-check "just to be sure", and we may want to be sure in a way that is stronger than just knowing. Inquirers may also aim at higher-order epistemic states, such as knowing that they know, insofar as it's possible to know without knowing that you know, or at other ways in which their epistemic position can be improved.

Such considerations may motivate alternative aims of inquiry. For instance:

> **I-Aim** If S rationally inquires into Q, S aims to improve their epistemic position with respect to Q.[8]

[7] See Beddor (ms) for similar cases.

[8] Version of this aim are defended by Archer (2021), Falbo (2021, forthcoming), and Woodard (2022, forthcoming).

Defenders of I-Aim take it to explain and be compatible with Rational-Double Checking. Agents who know and rationally double-check that p aim at improving their epistemic position with respect to p beyond knowledge. I won't argue against I-Aim in this paper. But I will argue that Rational Double-Checking doesn't give us any reason to seek an alternative to K-Aim.

3 Pursuing aims

Why is Rational Double-Checking supposed to be incompatible with K-Aim? The main idea seems to be that, if K-Aim is true, agents who inquire while knowing the answer are doing something irrational. This claim is captured by the following thesis:

> **Ignorance Norm** It's not rationally permissible to inquire into Q while knowing the answer to Q.[9]

Ignorance Norm is in direct contradiction to Rational Double-Checking, according to which it can be rationally permissible to inquire while knowing. The thought that Rational Double-Checking is incompatible with K-Aim, then, seems to be based on the idea that Ignorance Norm follows from K-Aim.[10]

Why would Ignorance Norm follow from K-Aim? K-Aim says that it's rational to inquire into a question only if you aim at knowing its answer. Ignorance Norm says that if you already know the answer, it's not rational to inquire. The connection is intuitive: it's irrational to pursue an aim that has already been achieved. That is:

> **General Aim Norm** It's not rationally permissible to aim at A when it's already the case that A.

[9] See Whitcomb (2010, 2017), Friedman (2017), and van Elswyk and Sapir (2021) for versions of this norm. See Archer (2018) for criticism not based on double-checking.

[10] Some authors formulate Ignorance Norm not in terms of rationality but, e.g., in terms of what one ought to do (e.g., Whitcomb (2010) and Friedman (2017)). In that case, Ignorance Norm and Rational Double-Checking may turn out to be compatible. But then there would be even less reason to oppose K-Aim, so I'll set that possibility aside. If, however, such a version of Ignorance Norm isn't compatible with Rational Double-Checking (or some other plausible version of it), then my argument should apply to it too: a suitable version of General Aim Norm will have to be posited, and for reasons similar to those outlined below, it will have to be rejected. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

General Aim Norm seems plausible. A chess player who still tries to make moves even though she's already won would seem to be acting irrationally. If General Aim Norm is true, then K-Aim entails Ignorance Norm.

But General Aim Norm is not generally true. Suppose Ann asked her roommate Beth to wake her up at 7am, since she has an important job interview in the morning. At 7am, Beth dutifully knocks on Ann's bedroom door to wake her up. Ann, however, woke up just two minutes earlier. Since Beth has no way of knowing this, the fact that Ann already woke up doesn't change the rationality of Beth's behavior. Beth is rationally trying to wake up Ann, even though Ann already woke up.

To take another example, suppose Carlos wants to make Shakshuka for dinner. On his way home from work, he realizes he might not have any tomatoes at home, so he stops by a grocery store to buy some. It seems rational to buy some now, instead of going home to check if there are any, and then likely go to the store. Now suppose that, as it turns out, Carlos already had enough tomatoes at home. That doesn't make Carlos's decision to stop at the grocery store irrational, given the information he had at the time. So Carlos rationally pursues the aim of having enough tomatoes, even though he already has enough tomatoes.

Since agents can be rationally unaware, or rationally uncertain, that their aim has been achieved, it's possible for them to rationally pursue an aim that they have already achieved. It might be superfluous, in a sense, but still in some cases the rational thing to do. This is what Beth and Carlos do, and many similar cases can be imagined.

So, General Aim Norm doesn't seem to be generally true, and this calls into question the idea the Ignorance Norm follows from K-Aim. But is there any reason to think that there are examples like the above in the case of inquiry? Yes; in fact, I think cases of rational double-checking show exactly that: it can be rational to pursue knowledge even when you already have it. I develop this line of thought in more detail in the next two sections.

4 Making sure

Double-checkers can be described as *making sure*. Deming, for example, is making sure that her door is locked. Evelyn, the expert surgeon, knows it's the left

kidney but still wants to make sure.

The phrase *make sure* is ambiguous, and I want to pick out a particular sense of it that's going to be central to my argument. A joke illustrates the ambiguity:

> Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses and stops breathing. His companion calls an emergency number on his phone and cries, "My friend collapsed! I think he's dead! What should I do?" The operator says, "Calm down; I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a gunshot, and the hunter says, "OK, now what?"[11]

Making sure that p can mean double-checking whether or not p. This is the operator's sense of *making sure*. But in another sense, making sure that p aims at the truth of p, and at being sure of it. This the hunter's sense of *making sure*. I'd like to focus on the latter.

Here are more examples to help us zero in on this sense of *making sure*:

> I want to buy a cake at the local bakery, which only takes cash. I have some money in my wallet, but I'm not sure if I have enough for the cake. So I go to the nearby ATM and withdraw $50, making sure I have enough.

> I park my car. As I start walking, I realize I'm not sure if I locked it. So I press the lock button on my key to make sure the car is locked.

> Before heading out to campus, I put a phone charger in my backpack, to make sure my phone doesn't run out of battery later in the day.

In each case, making sure that p entails wanting or aiming at p. I'm making sure I have enough cash because I want to have enough cash. I'm making sure the car is locked because I want the car to be locked. We don't just want p when we make sure that p. We also want to be sure that p. But notice that I'm not inquiring into anything while making sure in the above cases. When making sure the car is locked by pressing the lock button, for example, I'm not inquiring

[11] The joke is from https://richardwiseman.wordpress.com/research/laughlab/.

into or checking whether the car is locked. (Although making sure in this sense can involve inquiry; I say more on this below.)

We can thus say the following about this sense of *making sure*:

Making Sure S makes sure that p if and only if:

(i) S isn't sure that p;

(ii) S wants p;

(iii) S wants to sure that p because S wants p;

(iv) S acts so as to achieve p and being sure of p.[12]

Making sure that p, in a way, primarily aims at p. This is what is suggested by clause (iii). When we want to make sure that p, it's because we want it to be the case that p. I take this to be a familiar idea. We wouldn't be able to make sense of someone who said "I want to make sure I have a charger, but I don't care whether or not I have a charger." Relatedly, we often want to *know* that p because we want it to be the case that p. When a mother tells her son to let her know once he arrives safely to a destination, she wants to know her son arrives safely because she wants him to arrive safely. This illustrates the idea behind clause (iii), that we often want to be sure or to know that p simply because we want it to be the case that p.

This sense of making sure can be generalized. Just as one can aim to be sure that p because one wants p, one can aim at even stronger epistemic states towards p because one wants p. A parent may know, for example, that their child is safe, but may not know that they know it, and act to pursue the latter state. Or they might be 99.9% certain (which may be sufficient for being sure), but want to be even more certain. In this more generalized sense, making sure involves aiming to improve your epistemic state with respect to some desired aim. That is, where *E(p)* is some strong epistemic state with content p:

Making Sure (Generalized) S makes sure that p if and only if:

(i) S lacks *E(p)*;

(ii) S wants p;

[12] Perhaps *make sure* is a success verb and also entails the outcome of being sure. I set the issue aside here.

(iii) S wants *E(p)* because S wants *p*;

(iv) S acts so as to achieve *p* and *E(p)*.[13]

For instance, cases where I'm 99.9% certain I have enough cash but aim to be even more certain, and cases where I know the car is locked but act so as to know that I know it's locked, are cases of making sure in this sense. I'll use *make sure* in this generalized sense henceforth.

It's often rational to make sure that *p*. It can be rational to make sure that *p* even if *p* is already the case, and this is another reason why General Aim Norm (§3) is false. It can be rational to make sure your car is locked by pressing the lock button, even if your car is already locked. Or suppose you know pressing the button locks the car with 99.9% (independent) probability, and you have no other indication as to whether the car is locked. It may be rational to press the lock button three times, to be extra sure the car is locked. Since you have no other indication of whether the car was actually locked, the rationality of pressing three times doesn't depend on whether the first press already managed to lock the car.

Even though making sure aims at improving an agent's epistemic state, it's not on its own a kind of inquiring, although it may involve inquiring in some cases. When I get extra cash from the ATM to make sure I have enough, I'm not inquiring into anything. When the hunter makes sure his friend is dead by shooting him, he's not inquiring into whether the friend is dead. Making sure that *p* may involve inquiring in cases where you need to first figure out whether *p* in order to know how to proceed. Suppose I want to make sure the light is off in my office. I'll need first to check whether the light is on or off. If I find out it's off, I'll do nothing, though I'll become more sure that the light is off. If I find out it's on, I'll turn it off, and similarly gain confidence. Here, I'm not sure that the light is off, and making sure it's off requires first checking whether it's off.

[13] A reviewer suggests the following example to challenge condition (iv):

A: Our bank account has been frozen.

B: What!?

A: I'm so sorry, but I just read the letter from the bank.

B: I know, I know, but I need to make sure. I'm logging into our bank app now.

In this case, B is making sure the account is frozen but isn't at all trying to achieve that state of affairs. Here it is useful to recall the distinction I introduced earlier with the hunters joke between the 'checking' sense and the 'aiming at' sense of making sure. In the suggested case, B is making sure in the 'checking' sense, but my discussion is around the 'aiming at' sense.

5 Double-checking as making sure

We often want to make sure we know things. I might tell a friend who's learning to ride a bike:

(1) Make sure you know how to brake.

A professor might tell her students:

(2) Make sure you know when the essay is due.

You might tell a friend who's about to make a big purchase:

(3) Make sure you know what the return policy is.

I may repeat my new phone number many times to make sure I know it. I may write things down to make sure I remember them. And so on.

These cases all involve making sure in the sense of the previous section: when you make sure that you know, you aren't already sure that you know, you want to know, and you want to be sure that you know. Moreover, you want to be sure that you know because you want to know. That is, where *E(ϕ)* is some strong epistemic state with content ϕ and *Kp* means that S knows whether *p*:

> **Making Sure You Know** S makes sure she knows whether *p* if and only if:
>
> (i) S lacks *E(Kp)*;
> (ii) S wants *Kp*;
> (iii) S wants *E(Kp)* because S wants *Kp*;
> (iv) S acts so as to achieve *Kp* and *E(Kp)*.

I've already mentioned that making sure isn't a kind of inquiry, though inquiry may be involved—think of the case where making sure the light is off requires first checking whether it's off. In making sure that you know, we should expect to find inquiry involved more often. Indeed, inquiring is an effective way for making sure that you know. Suppose, for instance, that a student wants to make sure that he knows when an essay is due. He believes the essay is due a week

from now, but isn't sure that his belief is knowledge. He therefore checks the syllabus. Checking the syllabus is a type of inquiry, which the student engages in to make sure that he knows when the essay is due.[14]

Insofar as it's possible to know without being sure (or knowing, etc.) that you know, it's possible to make sure that you know when you already know. Just like it's possible to make sure the car is locked when it's already locked. And you can want to know when you already know just as you can want the car to be locked when it's already locked.

Consider again the student who wants to make sure he knows when an essay is due. Suppose, this time, that the student in fact knows when the essay is due, but doesn't realize that he knows. He can make sure he knows, even though he already knows. And he wants to make sure he knows because he wants to know.

Cases of double-checking like Evelyn's, I argue, fit this pattern precisely. Consider her case again, reproduced here:

> Evelyn is an expert surgeon. She has spent the morning in carefully studying her patient's file and knows that it's the left kidney that needs to be removed. Prior to scrubbing in, she decided to double-check her patient's file, one last time, just to be sure that it's the left kidney.

Call the proposition that it's the left kidney q. The following seem true about Evelyn (where 'sure' is understood in the generalized sense explained in §4):

(E1) Evelyn isn't sure she knows q.[15]

(E2) Evelyn wants to know q.

(E3) Evelyn wants to be sure she knows q.

The story is set up such that Evelyn wants to improve her epistemic position with respect to q. Since her epistemic position isn't already maximally strong, there is some epistemic state with respect to knowing q that she lacks: she isn't

[14] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify the relation between inquiry and making sure that you know.

[15] I use 'know q' here in the sense of 'know whether q'.

absolutely certain she knows q, or doesn't know that she knows q, or something of the sort. So (E1) is true. Since Evelyn wants to improve her epistemic position, and because of (E1), (E3) seems true as well. (E2) also seems true: surely Evelyn wants to have knowledge, rather than not have it, with respect to q, and it's possible to want or aim at something you already have when you're not sure you have it.

In addition, the following seems true as well:

(E4) Evelyn wants to be sure she knows q *because* she wants to know q.

If Evelyn didn't want to know q, she wouldn't want to improve her epistemic position with respect to knowing q. If, for example, she just didn't care which kidney needs to be removed, she wouldn't bother to check the patient's file. So it seems plausible that she wants to be sure she knows because she wants to know.

Finally:

(E5) By checking the patient's file Evelyn acts so as to know and be sure she knows q.

Checking the file improves Evelyn's epistemic position and makes her sure she knows. Since she already knows, it might seem superfluous on her part to act so as to know, but again, that can be rational when you're not sure, as I've already argued.

Taken together, (E1)-(E5) exactly fit the conditions of Making Sure You Know. What double-checkers like Evelyn do is make sure that they know.

Even though making sure isn't necessarily inquiring, double-checking is. When Evelyn checks the file, she is inquiring into whether it's the left kidney. Double-checking is a type of checking, and checking is a type of inquiring.[16]

There is a second type of double-checking. Deming, the door double-checker, is engaged in a slightly different sort of project. When Evelyn double-checks that the left kidney needs to be removed, if she finds out it's actually the right kidney, she'll know it's the right kidney, and she'll retain that knowledge. But if Deming finds out that the door is not locked, she won't just update her epistemic

[16]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the need for clarification on this point.

state; rather, she'll lock the door. Evelyn doesn't aim at the left kidney being removed, but Deming does aim at the door being locked. This second type of double-checking involves not just making sure that you know, for example, that the door is locked, but also making sure that the door is locked.

6 Conclusion

It can be rational to double-check that p even when you already know that p. This is incompatible with Ignorance Norm. But, as I've argued, Ignorance Norm doesn't follow from K-Aim, the thesis that rational inquirers aim at knowledge.

Double-checkers make sure that they know. As I've argued, making sure that p entails aiming at p and aiming at being sure that p, and the former aim is primary: you want to be sure that p because you want p. The same holds for making sure that you know: you aim at being sure that you know because you aim at knowledge. K-Aim is therefore compatible with Rational Double-Checking. By making sure they know, double-checkers do, after all, aim at knowledge.

The improvement aim of inquiry does get some things right. Rational inquirers do aim to improve their epistemic positions. But we often rationally aim to improve our epistemic positions without engaging in inquiry at all. Withdrawing cash from an ATM to make sure I have enough cash to buy a cake, and pressing the lock button on my car keys to make sure the car is locked, are cases where I rationally aim to improve my epistemic position. But they are also cases in which no inquiry is taking place. Seeking epistemic improvement is therefore not unique to inquiry. In making sure, we seek to improve our epistemic position with respect to some further aim. That further aim can itself be of an inquiring kind. We seek knowledge when we rationally inquire, and when we double-check we seek to improve our epistemic position with respect to the knowledge aim.[17]

[17]I'm grateful to two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

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