

The Epistemic and Zetetic Irrationality of Incessant Checking in OCD

Consider the following case:

Do I have HIV? Stella sits on the edge of her bed, the room still and silent except for the faint hum of her phone charging. She knows she used a condom that night, four months ago—she remembers checking twice—but the thought won't stop looping. What if it broke? What if it slipped? She's taken nine HIV tests since then, each one negative, each followed by a brief calm that dissolves within days. What if the tests were wrong because there was a mistake in the lab? What if, despite all that is known about the window period, the virus is still hiding, waiting? What if someone is sabotaging the tests so she can never know if she's infected? Stella keeps taking HIV test after HIV test, searching for a certainty she never finds.

Incessant checking is one of the most common compulsive behaviors used to relieve the anxiety caused by obsessions in OCD (APA, 2013). It is widely agreed that Stella's behavior can be practically irrational, as it only reduces her anxiety temporarily and may interfere with her daily goals. For instance, she has begun cancelling plans with friends and missing work deadlines because she spends hours researching testing accuracy or going out to take another HIV test. And the relief she gets from each negative result never lasts: it fades within days, sometimes hours, leaving the original distress intact. In this way, each new test does not resolve her anxiety but reinforces it—she learns that the next time the worry returns, the only way to cope will be to check again.

But what about her irrationality as an inquirer? Is there something irrational in what Stella believes about her inquiry, or in the way she carries it out? In this paper, I take a closer look at these questions. I argue that we must distinguish between two scenarios: in one, she keeps inquiring because she holds incorrect beliefs about her prospects for success in inquiry. In the other, she does so despite holding correct beliefs about those prospects. In the first case, Stella's failure is epistemic, while in the latter case it occurs at the level of inquiry (i.e., the failure is *zetetic*). In other words, incessant checking in OCD can be either epistemically or zetetically irrational, depending on why Stella violates the

SUCCESS NORM OF INQUIRY, a version of which has recently been defended by Hubacher Haerle (forthcoming).

SUCCESS NORM OF INQUIRY: S ought not to inquire whether P? at time t if, at t , it is irrational either to believe that one will achieve the aim of the inquiry or to suspend judgment about it.

Distinguishing between these two forms of irrationality allows for a finer-grained understanding of incessant checking in OCD than accounts that treat it as uniquely epistemically irrational (see Friedman, 2019) or zetetically irrational (see Hubacher Haerle, 2023, forthcoming). It also brings into view a dimension of insight that is not captured by standard clinical assessments, namely, whether the agent correctly evaluates her prospects for success in inquiry.

References

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