

UNITED WISDOM

Uncertainty that checking cannot remove

The Person and the Inner World

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I-08-N02 · EN

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Epigraph

> *“Some things are in our control and others not.”*

Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §1; English version attributed to Elizabeth Carter, Internet Classics Archive. Short excerpt. Text.

What this article is about

Imagine an ordinary evening: the email has been sent, the address checked, the attachment included. A few minutes later, you want to open it again. Then you wonder whether the last sentence was polite enough. Checking no longer reveals an error, yet the question returns: what if the recipient understands it differently? At first, this seems to be one task—making sure everything is all right. In fact, the first check concerns a file, while the later ones try to obtain a guarantee about another person's future attitude.

This article examines the boundary between information we can clarify and uncertainty that another inspection cannot remove. It does not suggest abandoning precautions. Checks may be necessary in work, health, and safety. The question arises when an action stops adding information while life is still waiting for permission to begin. We will distinguish a fact, a prediction, and a demand for complete certainty; consider why another person's response cannot be checked in advance; and compare limited psychological information with Stoic philosophy. The practical aim is more modest than fearlessness: finding a sufficiently grounded action that does not pretend to know the entire future.

I. A check answers a particular question

A useful check has an object. It can establish whether an account number matches, a door is locked, or a calculation agrees with the input. It has a way to detect an error and a condition for finishing. When an accountant compares a total with a document, another reading may change the decision. When someone rereads an email that has already been sent to become certain they will never be rejected, the document does not contain the answer they need. The distinction begins with the question the action can actually answer.

In a hypothetical example, a traveller checks the passport's expiry date and entry requirements. This is work with available information. They also want to know whether they will

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enjoy the trip and avoid every unpleasant conversation. Those expectations may affect preparation, but they do not turn into documents. Checking the passport does not become useless because the second question exists. Yet a tenth look at the passport brings the answers to that second question no closer. It helps to notice when one object quietly takes the place of another.

There are difficult cases too: instructions are ambiguous, a website contradicts the organiser's email, or the information has changed. Returning to the subject may then be justified because there is a new reason for doubt. The criterion is not the number of repetitions alone. Two checks can be uninformative; several can be necessary. What matters more is new information, an independent method of verification, or a specific discrepancy that has been found. This distinction is not a diagnostic test. It provides language for describing an action without prematurely accusing yourself of excessive anxiety.

II. The future is not inside today's document

We can make grounded predictions about the future, but we cannot inspect it like a finished room. A contract limits some risks; it does not show every circumstance of the later collaboration. A résumé helps assess a candidate's experience; it does not contain every future decision. Caring for someone allows us to arrange available help; it does not make that person independent of chance. Foresight matters precisely in a world where unknown circumstances remain. If everything were known in advance, it would mean something different.

Imagine someone choosing a short educational programme. They have established its cost, schedule, teaching staff, and refund conditions. Now they want to be certain the choice will not prove wrong compared with every other possible course. Such a check would require living several incompatible future lives. Even detailed reviews cannot provide that opportunity. They assist assessment but cannot replace participation. Another row in a spreadsheet may be useful; the spreadsheet's endlessness does not itself become an excellent method of choosing.

The cost of an error matters especially here. A decision about treatment, a major financial commitment, or physical safety cannot be equated with choosing an evening activity. More serious consequences may require specialist advice and independent checks. Yet even professionally prepared decisions rarely guarantee the absence of every consequence. This article's editorial conclusion concerns the form of the demand: “enough for a responsible step” differs from “rules out every imaginable outcome.” What counts as enough must be established for the particular task, not by one universal formula.

III. Certainty and relief can diverge

After a useful check, information becomes more accurate. After a reassuring repetition, someone may sometimes feel better while the information remains the same. These are different results. Relief should not be dismissed: a difficult experience can indeed interfere with life. But calling it new evidence of safety creates confusion. When relief fades, it may seem that the evidence has lost its force, although the verified fact has not changed at all. The temptation is then to obtain the same feeling through the same action again.

NIMH's publication on obsessive-compulsive disorder distinguishes ordinary double-checking from symptoms that are difficult to control, cause significant distress, or interfere with everyday life. Its description of compulsions notes possible temporary relief. This is clinical information about a specific disorder, not a basis for diagnosing someone from the email scene. One action's resemblance to an example in a fact sheet establishes neither its cause nor a diagnosis nor an appropriate treatment.

For everyday reflection, one can cautiously ask what changed after the last action: the document, understanding, or only tension? The answer “tension” does not mean the action is forbidden. It allows its function to be named more honestly. If someone wants support, a conversation with a friend can explicitly be about the experience. It need not masquerade as an expert assessment that conclusively certifies the future. If repetitions become distressing and take over life, this question can also be discussed with a professional; the article does not replace that assessment or prescribe stopping rituals on your own.

IV. “What if” is not a new fact

A possibility and evidence often sound equally insistent. “The email contains the wrong date” points to a discoverable discrepancy. “What if they decided I was disrespectful?” may express a supposition without new data. It need not be false; we simply lack grounds to regard it as established. Such a thought is better placed among possible explanations than turned into a hidden fact to which every later action must submit. The unknown permits several outcomes, not only the hardest one.

In a hypothetical exchange, the other person gives a short reply. That is an observation. “They are irritated with me” requires further grounds: perhaps they are tired, busy, or usually write brief messages. Alternatives should not become a new reassuring fantasy that they are definitely just busy. Their purpose is to restore the precise extent of our knowledge. We know the reply's length and do not know the motive. Clarifying the subject may sometimes be appropriate; demanding an immediate check of every possible feeling the other person has may itself alter the relationship.

Holding this distinction is especially difficult when the emotional stakes are high. If a relationship matters, the missing answer can feel like an unbearable gap. Yet a strong experience primarily tells us how significant the situation is to us. It does not provide direct access to another person's intention. We can acknowledge both “I am afraid of losing this connection” and “I do not yet know what the pause means.” These statements do not cancel each other out. They allow a choice between conversation, waiting, and help without turning one feeling into investigator, judge, and source of every fact.

V. Responsibility does not require omniscience

The demand to foresee everything often takes a moral form: if I care enough, I will prevent anything bad from happening. But care is exercised within limited circumstances. It involves actions, available information, and reasonable measures rather than power over every event. This distinction does not release us from obligations. It helps establish what an obligation actually is: notifying, agreeing, preparing a fallback, or consulting a professional. The more specific the duty, the less it resembles an endless watch over the entire future.

Imagine the organiser of a meeting. They have checked the address, accessibility, and time, received confirmations, and communicated changes. One participant may still arrive late. If the organiser must call that person under an agreed rule, the call makes sense. If they are trying to guarantee that nobody will ever feel inconvenienced, the task has no finite completion. Another message may then serve to protect against their own feeling of guilt. This is an editorial hypothesis for an imagined scene, not an explanation of every organiser.

The appropriate question is what the person has actually promised and what they can genuinely manage. Sometimes they will discover they took too little responsibility; sometimes too much. We cannot select the reassuring answer in advance. Examining obligations can lead to further action, an apology, or clarification of boundaries. What matters is that each relates to a particular object. The need to act remains, but the action stops being an attempt to atone for the mere existence of risk. We are responsible for the work available to us; we consider the outcome separately, taking account of unknowns and other people's actions.

VI. The Stoic distinction and its limit

At the beginning of the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus separates what is in our power from what is not. This is a position in Stoic ethics preserved in the record of his pupil Arrian; we use the English version attributed to Elizabeth Carter by the Internet Classics Archive. The text has its own demanding account of freedom in moral choice. It cannot quietly be transformed into contemporary clinical advice or evidence that a person can voluntarily control every feeling.

For our topic, the distinction opens a question about boundaries: which action is mine, and which outcome also depends on others? We can prepare a presentation conscientiously without determining every listener's opinion in advance. We can send a clear message without wholly managing its reception. This is the authors' application of a philosophical distinction to modern hypothetical scenes. It does not claim that other people's opinions have no consequences. Reputation, work, and relationships genuinely matter; limited power over them does not make them nonexistent.

There is a danger of turning Stoicism into an accusation: if everything depends on judgement, an anxious person supposedly just thinks incorrectly. That formula goes beyond this article and overlooks health, environment, and history. A philosophical text offers a way to discuss responsibility, not a measure of suffering's moral quality. Its useful tension remains when we neither soften the doctrine into a commonplace tip nor offer ancient severity as universal treatment. Readers may adopt the distinction without accepting the entire Stoic worldview or promising immediate calm.

VII. Another person does not become a testable device

Closeness gives us access to a person's words and actions, not uninterrupted access to their inner world. Sometimes a direct question clarifies a relationship. Sometimes an answer fails to provide final certainty because we want a lifetime guarantee rather than information about today's intention. A partner may honestly say they want the relationship to continue. That is a meaningful statement. It is not a contract ruling out every future change. Without distinguishing these levels, no amount of sincerity will be enough.

In a hypothetical couple, one person asks several times whether everything between them is all right. The other answers and initially regards the question as an ordinary request for support. Later, they begin to feel that every word is being examined as inadequate evidence. This scene does not establish a particular psychological mechanism in every couple. It illustrates a possible fork: agree on a specific subject that needs discussion, or acknowledge that enduring uncertainty is difficult right now although there is no new information to discuss.

A request for support can remain voluntary and specific: “Waiting for the answer is hard; could you stay with me?” This does not require a friend to guarantee the impossible. Their boundaries matter too: they may be busy, tired, or unready. Declining one conversation does not automatically mean the connection has been destroyed. Respect for uncertainty includes both freedoms—to ask and to answer according to one's capacity. If a relationship is actually unsafe, safety measures and appropriate help take precedence over practising patience; an unavailable guarantee does not create an obligation to endure harm.

VIII. Sufficiency depends on cost and reversibility

The decision to stop checking cannot become one rule for every circumstance. Some professions have mandatory procedures, and a personal wish to reduce anxiety does not override them. In everyday situations, we can consider the consequences of an error, the reversibility of a step, and the possibility of correction. Checking the transmission of a medical prescription differs from checking an invitation to take a walk. Differences between tasks enable us to establish sufficiency; the aim is not to become someone who never double-checks anything.

Imagine a small purchase that can be returned. The buyer has compared the needed features, established the return conditions, and stayed within budget. They can choose while some doubt remains. Buying a home requires other information and specialist checks. Even there, however, endlessly reading comments does not replace assessment of the specific documents. Sometimes increasing the amount of material disguises the absence of the right kind of knowledge. Another general article may be less useful than a targeted question to someone able to examine the decision's object.

An editorial tool here is to specify in advance a finishing condition and a condition for reopening the question. For example: “I compare the address with the confirmation; I return to it if a change is communicated.” This is neither a universal safety protocol nor a treatment programme. Its value is in distinguishing stable information from an event that actually changes it. If defining conditions itself becomes another distressing ritual, expanding the spreadsheet should not be called success. The approach should assist a concrete task; significant distress is a reason to seek help, not demand more discipline.

IX. Between waiting and withdrawing from life

A pause can be a responsible decision. Insufficient data sometimes means waiting for a test result, document, or professional answer. Waiting for complete internal certainty works differently: the external answer has arrived, but permission still does not. In a hypothetical example, someone is ready to submit an application but postpones it each day until they can know that rejection will not hurt. That knowledge may never appear before acting. The application remains unsent because of something other than a missing field on the form.

We can acknowledge the possible cost of rejection without promising not to feel it. It makes sense to consider whether the application is needed now, whether postponement is possible, and what support would be available afterward. Sometimes declining to participate will be a free choice fitting the circumstances. Sometimes the person will still want to try. The article does not favour action at any price. It suggests distinguishing “I do not want to” from “I want

to, but permit myself only under an impossible guarantee.” Both statements deserve attention; neither should automatically replace the other.

Uncertainty is encountered at the particular scale of a chosen task, not through one heroic effort. Someone may have money for a small trial but not a large loss. They may have support for a difficult conversation but lack the energy for it today. Accounting for resources is not weakness in reasoning. It makes the distinction usable in a world where tired, busy, interdependent people make decisions. A sufficiently grounded step remains the step of a particular person on a particular day, not an examination in philosophical maturity before an imagined audience.

X. When the question changes from checking to seeking help

If repeated checks occupy substantial time, are difficult to control, or seriously interfere with work, sleep, and relationships, the task may exceed what reading can provide. Describing this to a doctor or qualified mental health professional is more useful than assigning yourself a diagnosis. NIMH's OCD publication describes clinical assessment in terms of symptoms and health history; everyday resemblance to a list of signs is insufficient. Our philosophical distinction should not become a reason to postpone that conversation.

To assist the conversation, one can describe a particular episode: what was checked, for how long, what happened when trying to stop, and what it interfered with. You need not first prove the problem is serious enough compared with other people's difficulties. The need for assessment depends on your own consequences and circumstances. Professional help need not begin with a ready-made name for the condition either. Other explanations, physical health, or living conditions may need clarification. That inquiry should not be replaced by “I simply do not know how to accept uncertainty.”

We return to the evening email with a more precise question. The attachment can be checked. Another person's future reaction cannot be extracted from the sent file. Tension can be acknowledged without turning it into evidence of an error. The available action may be one clarification, waiting, returning to another activity, or seeking help. What fits depends on the situation. Freedom here does not mean an absence of anxiety. It begins with the possibility of not assigning a check a task it cannot physically perform, and not treating that limitation as personal defeat.

XI. Who should provide the missing information

Sometimes uncertainty is not an unavoidable feature of the future. It arises because an organisation withholds conditions, a manager changes requirements, or an important decision is kept secret. Advice to learn to tolerate uncertainty may then conceal someone else's responsibility. An employee may ask what criteria their work is assessed against. A customer may request service conditions before paying. A patient may discuss comprehensible explanations and options with a doctor. Available information must be considered before every concern is declared a task of inner work.

Imagine someone repeatedly promised a payment date, while each answer remains vague. Further inquiries may seek an important commitment rather than an impossible guarantee. They are not demanding knowledge of every future event; they want the rule governing today's interaction. Documentation, professional advice, or a changed agreement may be appropriate, depending on circumstances. Uncertainty is distributed unevenly: one party controls information while another bears the consequences of its absence. That asymmetry does not disappear through a philosophical exercise.

The reverse case is possible too. An organisation has provided the terms, and someone now wants a guarantee that they will never change under any circumstances. They can clarify the procedure for changes, assess trust, and decide whether to agree. Yet absolute permanence is often impossible to promise. The question “What particular information is missing, and who can provide it?” helps distinguish the scenes. If another participant has the answer, the issue is a request and its boundaries. If it requires knowledge of an entire future life, the task returns to preparation and choice under residual risk.

An important limit follows: tolerance of the unknown must not become a convenient demand imposed on someone denied information. An honest approach to uncertainty includes the right to ask, refuse unclear terms, and seek competent help. It also includes honesty about one's own request. We can require a clear agreement without calling every remaining doubt evidence of deception. This preserves room both for protecting interests and examining facts precisely.

XII. A check can finish while correction remains possible

Sometimes it seems that finishing a check forfeits the right ever to return to the question. Stopping then acquires excessive weight: the choice must be made forever. Many everyday decisions work differently. Today's task can finish and be reconsidered if grounds appear. This does not guarantee easy correction of every mistake. It simply shows that the end of one action and the end of the whole story are different events. Confusing them can make even a small step feel like an irreversible verdict.

In a hypothetical project, a team chooses a working arrangement for two weeks, agreeing on an observable result and a review date. Today's check concerns readiness for the trial. Future assessment will draw on what actually happened. Trying to verify the two-week outcome before starting turns assessment into fantasy. A trial is appropriate only where its consequences are acceptable. Calling an action with unacceptable risk an experiment cannot excuse skipping a required professional check.

There is another subtle boundary: a planned review differs from continuous covert surveillance. If someone agrees to look at results on Friday but searches for signs of catastrophe every minute, the calendar entry alone has resolved nothing. This can be noticed without accusation: perhaps the task is too large or additional support is needed. Reducing the step or discussing the difficulty may be more useful than elaborating the schedule. The answer depends on the person and conditions; the right date is not promised to make waiting easy automatically.

A completed check makes space for new experience. A person sends the email and receives an actual answer, attends the first class and discovers their interest, holds the meeting and sees the difficulties that arise. Experience does not replace preparation; it follows where participation is acceptable. It may confirm the decision or require correction. We need not know in advance which will happen. It is enough to preserve the ability to distinguish new information from another return of an old fear, along with the right to seek help if that distinction becomes too difficult.

What this means in practice

For one harmless everyday episode, you may voluntarily write three sentences: what is known, what can still be learned, and what concerns a future outcome. In the email example, we know where it went; can check the attachment; cannot know every recipient reaction in advance. It then makes sense to name the purpose of the next action. Is it meant to correct a discovered error, obtain a missing fact, or help endure waiting? The third purpose is legitimate too, but need not be disguised as new evidence.

Before another check, it can help to look for a specific reason to return to the object. Has information changed, an independent method appeared, or a discrepancy been found? If so, a check may be justified. If only the thought of a possible bad outcome has returned, it can be named as a supposition, and you can decide whether a conversation about support is needed. This pause does not prescribe forcibly suppressing a thought. Nor does it override work instructions, medical advice, road and household safety rules, or protective measures against an actual threat.

You can choose a modest finishing condition for this particular task in advance. It need not promise calm. “The address matches the confirmation” is more precise than “I will never doubt again.” If useful, add a condition for revision: a new message, changed deadline, or discovered error. If notes multiply and themselves turn into burdensome repetition, stop making the system more elaborate. The purpose is not perfect surveillance of your doubts. A conversation with a professional may then be a more appropriate next action.

After finishing, you can assess more than the feeling: was information obtained, the specific task resolved, and a return to the chosen activity possible? Continuing anxiety does not automatically mean the check is unfinished. Yet substantial worsening, difficulty coping, or repetitions seriously interfering with life deserve professional assessment. An immediate threat to life or safety calls for emergency help where you are, not continuing the exercise. This practice clarifies the language of everyday decisions; it is not a stand-alone treatment for OCD or another condition.

Key quotation

> *“You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be.”*

Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §1, addressing a distressing impression; version attributed to Elizabeth Carter, short excerpt. This is a Stoic way of examining judgement, not a claim that every danger is imaginary.

Connections between traditions

Sources	A similarity worth discussing	Boundary
Epictetus's Stoic distinction ↔ the editorial distinction between task and outcome	Clarifying the domain of one's action	Stoic ethics is not a clinical model; the everyday framework is the authors' application
Appearance in *Enchiridion* §1 ↔ fact and possible explanation	Felt persuasiveness does not replace examination of the object	A comparison of reasoning approaches, without claiming a shared psychological theory
NIMH's clinical information ↔ philosophical discussion of responsibility	Particular difficulty and its consequences matter	Clinical assessment and a philosophical position serve different purposes; neither replaces the other

This is a limited comparison, not a survey of every religion. Unread teachings are not declared to agree; medical information does not establish Stoic metaphysics.

Sources

• Epictetus. *Enchiridion*, §§1, 35, 38. Internet Classics Archive, version attributed to Elizabeth Carter; the named sections were read. This article uses §1: philosophical boundaries between action and outcome, and examination of appearances. A complete critical edition was not checked.

• NIMH. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: When Unwanted Thoughts or Repetitive Behaviors Take Over. Definition, symptoms, ordinary double-checking versus clinical symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment sections were read. Used for a limited distinction and reasons for assessment; not a self-diagnostic tool.

Tags

uncertainty, checking, double-checking, sufficiency, responsibility, fact, prediction, appearance, Epictetus, Stoicism, limits of control, waiting, support, decision, reversibility, safety, OCD, professional help, risk, relationships, autonomy, clarity, unknowns, care, action

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