

The Duty to Object

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We have the duty¹ to object to things that people say. If you report something that I know is false or unwarranted, or potentially harmful to others, I may be required to say as much. Suppose, for instance, that you claim at a departmental gathering that a colleague plagiarized a crucial passage in his book and I know that this is merely a rumor. I seem obligated to object to this—to make clear that the plagiarism accusation is problematic.

My aim in this paper is to explore in greater depth how to best understand this duty. Broadly speaking, there are at least two central sources of the normative force at work in the duty to object: epistemic and moral. While the primary focus of my discussion will be on the epistemic dimension—in large part because this is where the most original work can be done—I will also frequently bring in the moral dimension, particularly when doing so will productively contribute to a fuller understanding of the duty to object.

Here is the plan for the paper: after some preliminary remarks in Section 1, I turn, in Section 2, to highlighting two central features of this duty that distinguish it from others, such as believing in accordance with the evidence or promise-keeping. In particular, I argue that whether we are obligated to object is directly influenced not only by what other relevant members of the conversational context or community do, but also by the social status of the agent in question. I then show, in Section 3, that these features are shared by the duty to be charitable, and the similarities between these two duties point to a potentially deeper explanation, which I develop in Section 4: while promise-keeping is regarded as a classic *perfect* duty, charity is an *imperfect* one. I then consider two criteria identified as central to imperfect duties and argue that both are true of the duty to object, giving us reason to conclude that the duty to object might be helpfully understood as an

imperfect one, and, further, that there are imperfect epistemic duties in general. I turn, in Section 5, to a particular conception of imperfect duties that understands them in collective terms, and I show that while a key aspect of this model must be rejected, the more general framework of understanding the duty to object as belonging to groups is promising. Finally, in Section 6, I develop this “imperfect duty to object view” in greater detail, and I argue that the duty to object should be crucially linked with the distribution of goods, including epistemic goods.²

1. Preliminary Remarks

While my aim in this paper is to shed light on the duty to object, some introductory remarks about both the “duty” and the “to object” parts will be helpful. Let’s begin with the latter. I’m here understanding objections as assertions that are added to a conversational context with the aim of correcting the record. Objections here do not require the likelihood of acceptance. I might discharge my duty to object even if I know in advance that acceptance will be very unlikely, perhaps because the views of the other members of the conversation are settled and strong. In this way, aiming to correct the record need only require the intention to have your dissenting voice noted. Moreover, I am focusing specifically on objections that target the propositional content of an assertion. It might be the case that what I say here applies not only to objections to *what* is said, but also to *how* it is said, *whom* it is said by, and so on. For the sake of clarity, however, I will restrict my attention to duties to object to the content of assertions.³

Regarding the “duty” part of this phenomenon, I mentioned earlier that there are two sources of the normative pressure at work. The first, and more familiar, is *moral*. What people say can produce life-altering harm to others or be the cause of grave injustices. An unwarranted accusation of plagiarism can irrevocably ruin a colleague’s reputation, leading to the loss of his job, career, family, and much more. A false eyewitness identification can rob a person of his freedom and

ultimately his life. Racist and sexist comments can not only undermine a person's sense of self, but also breed hatred and violence within communities. Since being good moral agents involves preventing at least some serious harms, especially when doing so would cost very little,⁴ speaking out against assertions that perpetuate such harms is surely called for.

In addition to the moral, the other source of the pressure to object is *epistemic*.⁵ It is a familiar fact that we have duties as individual knowers—I should, for instance, try to believe in accordance with the available evidence, choose reliable sources of information, avoid dogmatism and close-mindedness, and so on. But what is less familiar to us is that, as members of communities or broader social environments, we might also have epistemic obligations to others, both individuals and collectives.⁶

Indeed, the standard view of epistemic duties has at least two theses, both of which are at odds with the duty to object having an epistemic dimension. The first is that epistemic duties concern what we ought to believe, and thus their domain is strictly *doxastic*. For instance, Chase Wrenn says that “Epistemic duties are doxastic duties that are grounded in purely epistemic considerations, such as what evidence one has” (Wrenn 2007, p. 117). Given this, the typical strategy for arguing that there are no epistemic duties is to show that there are no propositions that we ought to believe. Wrenn makes this point clear when, in summarizing arguments against epistemic duties put forth by William Alston and Alvin Plantinga, he writes: “if it is truly one's duty to X, one must have voluntary control over whether or not one X-es. People do not have voluntary control over whether or not they believe something. Therefore, it is never one's duty (not) to believe something. Epistemic duties pertain to what one believes, and so there are no epistemic duties (Alston 1985, 1988; Plantinga 1988)” (Wrenn 2007, p, 116). In a similar spirit, Mark Nelson states the plan for his recent paper as follows: “I think that we have negative epistemic duties, but no positive epistemic

duties. There are things that we ought not to believe, but there is nothing that we ought to believe, on purely epistemic grounds” (Nelson 2010, p. 83).

The second thesis of the standard view is that one’s epistemic duties concern only one’s own doxastic life, and thus their domain is importantly *intrapersonal*. If, for instance, there is an epistemic duty to believe in accordance with the evidence, then this applies to me and my beliefs. Otherwise put, I have the duty to manage my own doxastic life, not that of others. This point is supported, in part, by the first thesis. If epistemic duties concern only beliefs, then it seems to follow fairly naturally that my epistemic duties do not extend to others. This is especially clear if duties require voluntary control, as I rarely have voluntary control over what those around me believe. Let’s call these two dimensions of the standard view the *doxastic* and the *intrapersonal theses* of epistemic duties, respectively.

My project here denies both of these theses, as I hold that we have epistemic duties that are neither strictly doxastic nor intrapersonal. In particular, I maintain that there is an epistemic duty to object to what we take to be false or unwarranted. This conflicts with the doxastic thesis, since objecting is an action rather than a belief, and it conflicts with the intrapersonal thesis insofar as the epistemic goals are primarily located in other agents, whether they are individuals or communities. For instance, just as I have a moral duty to keep you from starving if all it would take is handing you an apple from my kitchen table, so, too, I have an epistemic duty to prevent you from improperly believing if all it would take is a minor correction on my part. Indeed, whatever we take to be of epistemic value—truth, knowledge, understanding, and so on—there is simply no reason why we would have obligations to promote these ends only in ourselves. If it is valuable for me to believe truly, then it is also valuable for you to believe truly. If I have obligations to ensure this end in myself, why would I not, at least sometimes, have duties to assist others in this end?

Of course, these obligations are often, in whole or in part, moral in nature, but this need not always be the case. Just as we correct our own beliefs, even when they are practically and morally irrelevant, the corrections we offer to others need not be tied to any practical or moral question they currently face. In other words, our objections can be grounded in strong epistemic reasons, even in the absence of moral or practical considerations. Suppose, for instance, that I know that a data set that a colleague in the social sciences believes is inaccurate, though it is unlikely that there will be any practical or moral repercussions from this belief. There is still normative pressure to correct this colleague's belief, especially if doing so requires very little effort on my part. Upon learning that I knew the data set was false and yet failed to say anything, we would regard my colleague's anger or disappointment with me as perfectly justified. Moreover, this assessment would persist, even if I were to emphasize that I was aware that nothing practically or morally important depended on her belief being true. This highlights the distinctively epistemic dimension of the duty to object.

That there is both epistemic and moral pressure to object to what is false or harmful has taken on a new urgency, especially in the wake of shifts in the political landscape. More and more people are being called upon to call out lies, bullshit, and other forms of misinformation, especially ones that are pernicious. The media has repeatedly been urged to object to Trump's "post-fact" politics,⁷ with a recent headline reading, "Lies and the Lying Liar Who Tells Them: Donald Trump lies all the time, unashamedly, and the media need to say it, constantly."⁸ In response to Breitbart News publishing a piece arguing that acidification is "a non-problem invented by 'climate alarmists' because there is insufficient evidence for global warming,"⁹ a climatologist recently called upon scientists in *Nature* to "Take the time and effort to correct information," saying that "scientists should challenge online falsehood and inaccuracies—and harness the collective power of the Internet to fight back." And demands have been made that Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg, in particular, address the fake news being promulgated on their social media site,¹⁰ some even arguing

that such news is responsible for putting Trump in the White House.¹¹ These are just a few examples, but the internet is awash in pleas for people to step up to the epistemic and moral plate and object to the post-fact landscape we find ourselves in.

Despite this, it is also clear that we are not obligated to object to everything we take to be epistemically and morally problematic. Every day, I see online countless comments, blogposts, Facebook updates, Tweets, and op-eds that I regard as false, often dangerously so. I pass billboards, have brief conversations on airplanes, and overhear my kids chatting with their friends where assertions are offered with which I disagree, sometimes strongly. I even find myself in direct conversation with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances where what is said strikes me as misguided or unwarranted. However, it would clearly be too demanding, both epistemically and morally, to require objections in all of these cases. Were this so, we would quite literally be expected to spend nearly all of the hours in our days challenging those around us.

Following criticisms to utilitarianism, we might call this the *over-demandingness constraint*—just as there is said to be a “limit to how great a sacrifice morality...can legitimately demand of agents,”¹² so, too, there is a limit to how great a sacrifice epistemology can legitimately demand of agents. For instance, in the same way that it is too much to expect me to donate nearly all of my income to the poor, despite the fact that this would bring about much good, it is also too much to demand that I spend most of my waking hours correcting the record, even if this were to bring about much truth. This is related to, though distinct from, questions about the value of true belief in epistemology,¹³ and about alienation in ethics.¹⁴ While the truth is indeed highly valuable, surely this does not mean we should spend our time acquiring as many true beliefs as possible, especially when they are about trivial matters, such as the number of blades of grass in my backyard. Similarly, while bringing about goodness is important, this should not demand motivations that are “incompatible with the motivations necessary for fully valuable personal projects and relationships” (Murphy 1993, p. 270).

In both epistemology and ethics, then, our obligations—including the duty to object—should be sensitive to, and compatible with, the range of goals and values important to flourishing.

Thus, a full understanding of the duty to object would capture both its epistemic and moral dimensions, but in a way that avoids being overdemanding, especially in a world where social media leaves us inundated with information, much of which we regard as false and harmful.

2. Two Features of the Duty to Object

The duty to object differs in important ways from some other kinds of duties, both epistemic and moral. The first is that the duty itself seems subject to direct influence by what others are doing, especially those in the conversational context in question.¹⁵ In the epistemic realm, if I have a duty to believe in accordance with the evidence, I am not more or less obligated to do so if you are. I can't, for instance, look at how careful my husband is in the formation of his political beliefs and take this as a license for forming my own political beliefs with disregard for relevant evidence. Of course, I might rely on my husband's testimony as a reliable source of information regarding politics, but this doesn't at all diminish my own duties as an epistemic agent. I need to be just as sensitive to the evidence as I would be if he were not so careful—it's just that his testimony is some of the evidence on which I rely when I responsibly form my political beliefs.

The same is true in the moral realm. If I make a promise to you, my duty to keep it is unaffected by whether others around me do the same. Suppose, for instance, that Bill and I both make a promise to Rose to visit her in the hospital. Bill's keeping his promise, or failing to do so, in no way affects my duty to keep my promise to Rose. Sure, Rose might be less upset if Bill shows up when I don't because at least someone came to see her, but this doesn't affect the responsibility that I have to visit Rose and the corresponding claim that she has on me. Should Rose express her

resentment or disappointment at my not keeping my promise, it clearly won't help for me to say, "But Bill kept his."¹⁶

In contrast, the duty to object can be, and often is, directly affected by what others are doing. If I'm at a social gathering and someone says that Farmhouse closes at 11:00 PM, which I know to be false, my duty to object diminishes if you or others correct the record. Indeed, the duty might be altogether eradicated if either your objection is particularly powerful—perhaps you say, "I was at Farmhouse last night and I'm certain that it stays open until midnight"—or multiple people in our group object. The same is true with respect to the moral pressure to speak up. If a potentially damaging statement is made about a colleague at a party that I take to be groundless—say, that she didn't follow university policy in the handling of a student's complaint—my obligation to weigh in is affected by whether others do so. If your correction is sufficient to clarify or even settle the matter, then my obligation to also object might be eliminated. Indeed, we can imagine circumstances in which there is moral pressure to *not* say anything. Suppose that the damaging statement was made out of ignorance or unintentional carelessness, and the speaker seems deeply embarrassed after being called out. My adding my own objection might be seen as "piling on" criticism in an unnecessary and callous manner.

All of the examples discussed thus far focus on the duty to object being diminished or eliminated by what others do, but it can also be made more pressing.¹⁷ For instance, there are quite a few insightful and compelling pieces that have been written lately about the dangers of Donald Trump's misogyny, racism, and utter disregard for the truth. Such articles have been written both by members of my profession and by those in the broader social and political community. Given this, I feel no need to write an article or op-ed condemning Trump and his views because others have already done so, and have done so very effectively. But now suppose that no one had. Suppose that Trump's lies and bullshit and hatred were met by complete silence. Here, I seem to not only have

the duty to object, but also a very pressing one. This is at least in part because my actions are more likely to have substantial causal powers—there is a greater chance that speaking out would add new ideas and challenges to the conversation, while failing to do so would permit and perhaps even sanction Trump’s ideology. For both epistemic and moral reasons, then, my duty in such a scenario is great, as it seems crucial to furthering both truth- and goodness-related goals.

For the sake of ease of expression, let’s understand this feature of the duty to object as follows, where the duty at issue can be either epistemic or moral:

OTHERS: One’s duty to object can be directly influenced by whether others object, especially those in the conversational context in question.

Much, though not all, of the force to object comes from a more general duty to prevent others from suffering harms, both epistemic and moral, especially when doing so comes at very little cost to ourselves.¹⁸ This helps explain OTHERS: on the one hand, if the harms in question are already being prevented by others, then my stepping in might be causally inert, superfluous, or unnecessary. On the other hand, if no one is objecting, then my not doing so might contribute to the production of such harms, such as false beliefs, baseless conclusions, unjust accusations, damaging rumors, and so on.

Another feature of the duty to object that is not shared by many other duties is that it can be directly affected by social status. By “social status,” I include not only those properties that contribute to differences in power, paradigmatic examples of which are race, sex, gender, and class, but also properties that are more epistemic in nature, such as authority and expertise, which often accompany professional roles. For instance, my epistemic duty to consider relevant counterevidence is not impacted by the fact that I’m white or a woman or a professor. Of course, such social positions might put me in touch with more or different bodies of evidence and might bear on what counts as “relevant,” but I don’t have less of a duty to consider the evidence that is available than

does the President of Northwestern, nor a greater duty than do my undergraduate students. The same is true of my moral duty to keep my promise to, say, take you for your dialysis treatment. Sure, positions of powerlessness might make it difficult to make promises in the first place, and there might be more conditions that provide excuses for not keeping them—such as unreliable childcare, a disconnected phone, and so on—but the duties themselves do not vary.

In contrast, if a tenured, white, male professor hears a fellow colleague make a clearly sexist remark, his duty to object might be greater than that of his black, female, junior colleague. This might be true both epistemically and morally. Let's consider the former first: with great power in a domain often comes greater authority, and thus an increased likelihood that one's testimony will have an effect. So, if we assume that the sexist remark in question is false and that one of our aims as epistemic agents is to promote the truth, then the white professor objecting to it might have more epistemic impact in producing true beliefs, both at the individual and the collective level.¹⁹ That this is the case is supported by a recent study by Kevin Munger (2016), in which he looks at the impact of calling out racist harassment online via Twitter. To this end, he used "bots" to object to harassers, varying their identities not only by in-group (white man) and out-group (black man) membership, but also by the number of Twitter followers each bot has. Munger found that subjects who were sanctioned by high-follower white males significantly reduced the use of racist slurs, leading to the following title of a recent article in *The Atlantic*: "Why Online Allies Matter in Fighting Harassment: A clever experiment with Twitter bots shows that telling people not to be racist can work—but only if it comes from someone influential and white."²⁰ In this same article, the author writes:

There's a reason why higher-status members of these communities bear a larger share of the responsibility for speaking out against racist or bigoted speech," says Betsy Levy Paluck, a psychologist at Princeton University. "This isn't just a moral judgment but an empirical regularity that's been coming out of many research programs: People with higher status are

influencing norms, and with that influence comes responsibility. If anyone says, I'm not a role model, that's a wish, not a fact.

Here are other examples of this kind: a pediatrician speaking out about the safety of vaccines, a prosecutor objecting to police misconduct, and a university official condemning ineffective sexual assault policies on campus. In each case, the duty to object might be greater for the person in question than it is for the average citizen in large part because that person's objecting is likely to lead to more true, and fewer false, beliefs. Similar considerations apply at the moral level. Surely there is more moral pressure for the tenured, white, male professor to object to the sexist remark than there is for his junior colleague, both because he has the social standing to bring about positive change and because there is so little risk of harm for him. He has political, professional, and economic advantages that make him far less vulnerable. He doesn't have to worry about being regarded as stereotypically angry or whiny, and he doesn't risk losing his job and financial stability.

For the sake of ease of expression, let's understand this feature of the duty to object as follows, where the duty at issue can be either epistemic or moral:

SOCIAL STATUS: One's duty to object can be directly influenced by one's social status.

What this feature makes clear is that with greater power comes greater responsibility to speak up against both epistemic and moral wrongs.²¹

Both OTHERS and SOCIAL STATUS are supported by our practices of praise and blame. We are far less likely to criticize someone for silence when everyone else has already loudly protested, and we are more likely to do so when no one has. Imagine, for instance, that I recount to a friend that you reported that a colleague had plagiarized a passage in his book, that I knew this was merely a rumor, and yet I remained completely silent. No doubt upon asking me why I didn't say anything, she would have quite different reactions to, "Well, everyone else immediately objected, and so I didn't think further good would come from my doing so, too," and "I didn't want to be the only

person to say something.” Similar considerations apply to social status: I might regard the actions of a black undergraduate student who speaks out against racist activities on her campus as supererogatory and deserving of significant praise, while a tenured professor might simply be fulfilling expectations when she does so. Indeed, it is generally met with disapprobation when those in power remain silent in the face of conflict and allow the most powerless and vulnerable to put themselves at risk by doing all of the talking.

OTHERS and SOCIAL STATUS also point to a fundamental difference between a duty like promise-keeping and one like objecting: the latter is deeply *social* in a way that the former is not. Whereas the obligation to keep a promise is unaffected both by the social world beyond that of the promiser and promisee, the duty to object is inextricably tied to social relations.

3. Limited Goods

OTHERS and SOCIAL STATUS have been identified as two features of the duty to object. While I’ve focused on how these features aren’t present in some duties, such as promise-keeping, others seem to be far more similar in these respects. Arguably one of the clearest parallels is with the duty of charity. I have the duty to be charitable, perhaps by donating to the poor, but surely it is affected both by what others are doing and by my social status. If no one in my community is donating to a local economically disadvantaged family’s fund to pay for expenses associated with a medical emergency, then there might be greater pressure for me to do so than if everyone were. If I come upon a homeless man on the street in frigid weather, it may be less obligatory for me to help him if four others are already coming to his aid. Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates have greater obligations to engage in philanthropy and charitable giving than I do, and I have greater ones than do my incarcerated students at Stateville Correctional Center.

I want to claim that at least one explanation for the similarity between the duty to object and the duty to be charitable is that, in a very important sense, *both involve limited goods*. This is obvious with respect to charity. Even the most privileged among us do not literally have infinite wealth—they need to make choices about when and to whom to donate. To make their contributions most effective, they will want to engage in deliberate and strategic charitable investments. If they support causes or foundations arbitrarily, or even too broadly, their charity may become ineffective or even counterproductive. This might happen, for instance, if the charities in question work at cross purposes—such as Planned Parenthood and the National Right to Life—or if the donation forces out other potential donors—such as Trump supporting the Global Fund for Women. For those of us with far more modest resources, this pressure is even greater. If I have only \$10,000 to donate annually, the organizations that I choose to support will be critical, in terms of both the impact that I would like to make and to what I would like my name linked. And for those without any additional resources to give away, the ability to engage in charitable acts might be altogether denied to them.²²

Similarly, there is a critical sense in which our voices are a limited epistemic good. Sure, it might be possible to speak out against things from morning until night, but in order for our *objections to have traction*, we need to be more cautious. Indeed, just as charitable contributions need to be made deliberately and strategically, so, too, do objections need to be made this way in order to be effective.²³ If I object to every argument both on behalf of, and against, stricter gun laws in the U.S., then my weighing in will have little chance of promoting epistemic success. If I speak out against everything with which I disagree on social media, and object every time my kids say something problematic, and voice every opinion I have at department meetings, and sign every petition that appears in my e-mail, people will start tuning me out. If I devote much of my voice to weighing in on a particular matter, I might become known as a “single issue” person, and my considerations might be ignored as a result.²⁴ Effective objections are a finite epistemic good, and we need to distribute them wisely.

It should be noted that while objections *simpliciter* are assertions that are added to the conversational context with the aim of correcting the record, effective ones typically involve more, though what this “more” involves can take on different forms. Sometimes, objections with traction are ones that are accepted by at least some members of the conversational context. Other times, they will have weaker functions, such as sowing seeds of doubt about the targeted proposition, or being factored into the overall evidential basis of the beliefs of the audience members. Still others will be such that they are not immediately rejected or defeated. At a minimum, however, we might say that effective objections cannot be systematically ignored or silenced by the members of the conversational context.²⁵ I emphasize “systematically” because we would be reluctant to say that an epistemic agent’s objections are effective if they are merely not tuned out in every conversational context she finds herself in, but never even rise to the level of being factored into the evidential basis of the corresponding beliefs.

One might resist my diagnosis here by arguing that it is not the objections themselves that are a limited epistemic good, but, rather, it is the attention of the relevant audience.²⁶ Suppose that I object every time I disagree with someone, and each time my objection is epistemically proper—it is justified, well-supported evidentially, reliably produced, and so on. The epistemic status of my objections does not diminish simply because I object more, nor does it increase because I object less. The objections remain just as justified, regardless of their quantity. Given this, one might conclude that the limited good in question is neither objections, nor something epistemic in nature, since attention is an entirely psychological matter.

By way of response, I will make two points, First, if the limited epistemic good were the attention of the audience, then there shouldn’t be a significant difference in traction between, say, one person raising 35 objections and 35 different people raising these same objections. But clearly this is not the case. When one colleague at work or one member of an organization repeatedly raises

objections, it is not uncommon for her to take on the reputation of simply being a complainer, which often in turn results in her objections having less epistemic force. Similar considerations don't apply when the same number of objections are raised by different members of the relevant community. This supports the conclusion that the objections, rather than the audience's attention, are the limited epistemic good.

Second, while there is a sense in which the independent, objective epistemic value of one's testimony doesn't diminish simply because one objects more or less, the quantity of one's objections can certainly bear on their overall epistemic status. For instance, audience members might form beliefs that function as defeaters for a repeat objector's testimony.²⁷ Perhaps the hearer comes to believe that the speaker is an unreliable source because she doesn't appropriately discriminate, or that she is close-minded because she rejects so much of what is said. In addition, the audience members might become less reliable recipients of the objector's testimony by virtue of adopting a dismissive or impatient stance in relation to her testimony. In both cases, the overall epistemic force of the objections in the testimonial exchanges is diminished, not the attention of the audience members.

The fact that objections with traction are limited can help explain both OTHERS and SOCIAL STATUS. We are all members of various social groups, and at least part of what makes it the case that both the actions of others and our own social status can bear on our own responsibilities is that some of our resources are not only limited, but more or less limited than those around us. If I have only so many objections that have traction, then my use of them will quite naturally be influenced by features of the social world. If others have already weighed in, it may be best for me to conserve my voice for an equally problematic moment when no one has registered an objection yet. If I am in a context with my incarcerated students and somebody needs to correct the record to a correctional officer, it should be clear to me that I have far more objections to use than they do, and so my duty

to speak up is greater. When resources or goods are limited, whether material or immaterial, those with more of them have increased responsibilities.

The dissimilarities between the duties to object and to keep promises, and the similarities between the duties to object and to be charitable, point to a potentially deeper explanation. Promise-keeping is regarded as a classic *perfect* duty, while charity is an *imperfect* one. Given this, there are two questions I would like to explore next: first, is the duty to object an imperfect one, too?; and, second, does it follow from this that in addition to imperfect moral duties, there are imperfect epistemic ones?²⁸

4. Imperfect Duties

At the heart of the notion of an imperfect duty—paradigmatically including charity, mercy, gratitude, beneficence, and the like—is the idea that discretion and latitude are allowed in their fulfillment.

Charity, for instance, might require that I donate to the poor, but it doesn't specify to whom or how much. I may fulfill this duty by sending \$200 to Oxfam every month or by sending \$500 to Habitat for Humanity twice per year. Contrast this with the classic perfect duty of promise-keeping, where there is no discretion or latitude regarding how I satisfy it. If I promise to visit Rose in the hospital on Tuesday, then I have a duty to do just this. It won't do to instead visit George in the hospital on Tuesday, or to visit Rose at home on Thursday.²⁹ Indeed, this leads some to understand imperfect duties as being disjunctive in nature. Unlike my duty to keep my promise, which has the form of the duty to do act X, my duty to donate to the poor has the form of the duty to do act <X or Y or Z>.³⁰ But regardless of whether imperfect duties admit of such a disjunctive explanation, the key point is that there is latitude in their satisfaction.

Despite this, there are circumstances in which even paradigmatically imperfect duties can require specific acts. Suppose that I know that if my neighbor does not receive \$50 within the next

15 minutes, he will die. Further, suppose that this is an amount that would be a very minor sacrifice on my part, and I am the only person who is in a position to assist him. During that 15-minute interval, it would be odd to say that I have the duty to donate \$50 to my neighbor *or* to Oxfam *or* to Habitat for Humanity. The urgent, high-stakes needs of my neighbor combined with my relation to him seems to generate a very particular obligation on my part.

This sort of distinction is familiar to many, made famous by Singer's discussion of the duty to *Rescue* and the duty to provide *Aid*.³¹ Suppose that you're walking past a shallow pond and you see a child drowning whom you could easily rescue, though it would mean ruining your expensive outfit. Surely, you have the duty to rescue the child in such a case since doing so would prevent a significant harm without sacrificing anything of even roughly comparable moral value. Now compare this with the duty you have to aid a child across the globe who would avoid starvation if you write a check for the same amount you spent on the ruined outfit in *Rescue*. Despite the fact that both involve preventing significant harm at minimal cost, the duties involved are standardly regarded as importantly different.³² As S. Andrew Schroeder writes, "although both *Aid* and *Rescue* call for beneficence, the duty in *Rescue* is perfect, since it allows no latitude, while the duty in *Aid* is imperfect. We'd then say that the duty of beneficence, usually imperfect, becomes perfect in rescue cases" (Schroeder 2013, p. 560). Indeed, Schroeder identifies criteria that any account of imperfect duties should satisfy, with the ability to capture this difference between *Aid* and *Rescue* as central to one of them:

LATITUDE. *An account of imperfect duties should specify the duty in Aid (and relevantly similar cases) so as to make it in some respect less onerous than the duty in Rescue (and relevantly similar cases), allowing agents some kind of discretion.* (2013, p. 560)

In addition to LATITUDE, it is commonly noted that it is not only possible to do more than is required with imperfect duties, but that doing so is morally valuable. Schroeder writes, "you can be

more gracious, merciful, charitable, or beneficent than morality demands. You can't, on the other hand, keep more of your promises than morality requires, nor can you repay more than what you owe. You can, of course, do more for a friend than you've promised and you can give more money to a creditor than you agreed to, but the surplus in each case is no longer regarded as an instance of promise-keeping or debt-repayment. Rather, it is typically described as beneficence or gratitude" (2013, pp. 560-1). This leads to the second criterion that Schroeder claims any plausible account of imperfect duties should accommodate:

IMPERFECTION. *An account of imperfect duties should say what distinguishes imperfect from perfect duties, in a way that explains why it is frequently possible to do more than what an imperfect duty requires and why such excess frequently has moral value.*

Of course, while clearly different, LATITUDE and IMPERFECTION are nonetheless related to one another, for it is the latitude involved in the satisfaction of imperfect duties that opens up moral space for agents to do more than is required.³³

The duty to object fits nicely within this framework of imperfect duties.³⁴ First, there definitely seems to be latitude involved in its satisfaction. As was touched upon earlier, as a member of various groups—an epistemic agent, a U.S. citizen, a Northwestern professor, a member of the philosophy profession, a mother in a family, and so on—I have obligations to speak up when epistemically improper assertions are offered. Just as I ought to generally contribute to the moral flourishing of others so, too, should I do my part in ensuring that false and unjustified beliefs aren't promulgated. But surely I need not step in every time. If there were no discretion allowed, I would quite literally need to spend all of the hours in the day objecting to what is said on the news, in my Facebook feed, at the dinner table, and so on.

One might not find overdemandingness worries of this sort compelling, however, because one might think that the duty to object can be modeled on promise-keeping after all. If, for instance,

I promise to visit you in the hospital on Tuesday and there is a flood in Evanston that leaves my house and car under water, I have still broken my promise—it is just that I have an excellent excuse for doing so. Why not say something similar about the duty to object? I do have an obligation to object to everything that is false or unwarranted, but I often have a very good excuse for not doing so. By way of response, notice that even when external forces conspire to make one break a promise, one still feels guilt and apologizes for doing so. If the flood in Evanston makes it practically impossible for me to visit you in the hospital, I would still deeply regret breaking my promise and immediately call you to say how sorry I am. In contrast, I cannot recall ever ending a day where I felt guilt over not objecting to every false statement I heard on the train, or every unjustified claim on Facebook, or every questionable premise relied on by certain news sources. Moreover, an apology for not objecting in these cases does not seem called for. This supports the view that the duty to object is importantly different than the duty to keep one's promises.

Relatedly, we can easily envisage *Aid* and *Rescue* versions of the duty to object. Suppose that you're a scientist at a conference on innovative cancer treatment and a fellow participant speaks hopefully about a protocol that you've already tried for the past three years and found to be not only systematically ineffective, but often harmful. Qua cancer researcher, you have the general duty to object to epistemically problematic assertions about cancer treatment, which may be satisfied by doing so in academic journals, or at conferences, or among the colleagues in your lab, and so on. But here your imperfect duty seems to become a perfect one to weigh in about this specific protocol. Saving this scientist from heading down a fruitless and potentially destructive path in her research is the epistemic analogue of rescuing the drowning child. Indeed, we might even extend the language in the original scenarios as follows: we have the general duty to provide *epistemic aid* to others, but sometimes we are in contexts in which we need to engage in *epistemic rescues*. We can imagine many, many other cases like this: I know that

I am the only person who is aware that your theory about the defendant is based on misleading evidence, or that your source that tsunamis aren't expected during your vacation in Thailand is unreliable, or that your view of our colleague's work is sexist. We might say, then, that there is an *imperfect epistemic duty* to object in epistemic aid cases but a *perfect epistemic duty* to do so in epistemic rescue cases.

While wading into the discussions in ethics about what explains the difference between *Aid* and *Rescue* will take us too far afield for our purposes, it will be helpful in our understanding of imperfect epistemic duties to at least briefly mention what might account for this. One of the most obvious differences between the cases is the proximity that one bears to the person in need. Singer himself argues that "It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away" (Singer 1972, pp. 231– 32).³⁵ But we may think that proximity is connected to other important differences. For instance, Violette Igneski maintains that it is really an asymmetry in the moral determinacy of the situation that is doing the explanatory work in *Aid* and *Rescue*. She writes:

Whenever we may think that distance makes a difference it is really the determinacy of the situation that explains this difference. Thus when the victim is near the agent, we think the agent has an obligation to aid this person not because they are close to each other but because their closeness makes it more likely that there is a specific act that the agent at the scene can do to end the peril (and thus it is a morally determinate situation). When the agent and victim are distant, it is much less likely that there is some specific act that is morally required of this specific agent—and so it is not the fact that they are distant from each other that explains why the agent is not bound to do something in

this particular situation but that the situation is not morally determinate. (Igneski 2001, p. 612)

If Igneski is right here about the significance of moral determinacy in explaining the difference between *Aid* and *Rescue*, there is certainly an epistemic analogue. There is a specific objection that the cancer researcher in the above scenario can raise to prevent the epistemic peril of her colleague, whereas the general duty to object to what is epistemically improper is far more indeterminate. Of course, it isn't clear how much talk of determinacy adds to saying that there is latitude in the fulfillment of the duty in *Aid* that is not present in *Rescue*, but what I want to emphasize here is the epistemic version of the claim.

Another proposal is that we have special relationships with some people that give rise to distinct obligations. For instance, I have duties to my own children that I don't have to others, the President of Northwestern has obligations to the students on his campus that he doesn't have to those at Stanford, and Obama has duties to U.S. citizens that he doesn't have to Germans. Similar considerations might apply with respect to our neighbors or other members of our community, even those who are temporary. This might explain why proximity matters—it is not literally the proximity that generates obligations, but the special relationships that can be brought about by proximity that does. Once I am standing next to a child who is drowning and am the only person who can save her, I bear a special relationship to her—perhaps by being members of the same community or the same high-stakes event—that demands action on my part.

Whether this explanation works in the moral case is an open question, but the epistemic analogue is quite powerful, at least in a range of cases. The imperfect epistemic duty to object might become perfect when it is generated by special relationships. For instance, professional roles bring about various obligations, many of which involve objecting both to what is false and

morally problematic. Consider the various responsibilities associated with doctors, prosecutors, university administrators, research scientists, police chiefs, and so on. Each brings about both general and specific obligations. A university administrator might have the imperfect duty to object to policies that are harmful to universities in general, but might have the perfect duty to speak out against such problems at her home institution. A doctor might have the imperfect duty to challenge discredited medical treatments, but might have the perfect duty to do so when her own colleague or patient is relying on them. Moreover, as with the case of the child drowning, sometimes perfect duties are generated by relationships grounded in proximity. If I know that I am the only one privy to the fact that the gun in your hand is loaded, I might have the perfect duty to object when you say that it is not. Relying on our earlier language, such special relationships might help distinguish cases of epistemic rescue from cases of mere epistemic aid.

The duty to object also shares the second feature said to be true of imperfect duties: it is possible to do more than what the duty to object requires, where such excess has both moral and epistemic value. Consider charity, first: a graduate student might donate to Oxfam 50% of her annual stipend, leaving herself able to live only a very modest lifestyle. Clearly, this goes beyond what the imperfect duty of charity calls for, but also in a way that has moral value. A person who is already struggling to survive need not give so generously to others, yet doing so is nonetheless deserving of praise and admiration. Now suppose this same graduate student also frequently speaks out in a very public way against, say, sexual violence against women, both in general and in particular cases. She does this at great expense to herself in terms of time and exposure, and she does so when members of the profession in positions of far greater power and security, such as tenured faculty members, remain silent. These actions go beyond what the duty to object calls for, especially when one is a student without secure employment, and also in

a way that can have both moral and epistemic value. We can imagine, for instance, that the student's objections lead to policy changes at her home institutions, to false narratives about sexual assault being replaced with accurate ones, and to victims coming forward and feeling supported. In this way, both LATITUDE and IMPERFECTION, which are features that are distinctive of imperfect duties, apply to the duty to object.

I should note that I have been identifying knowledge-related pressure as involving an epistemic duty to object and goodness-related pressure as pointing to a moral duty to object. But, of course, in most cases, there are both kinds of pressures. In the example I offered above of the cancer researcher, for instance, false beliefs and significant harms will result from your failure to object to the effectiveness of a new protocol for treating cancer, and so both duties are at work, despite my presenting this as an epistemic rescue case. If we would like to isolate the epistemic pressure more clearly, we can modify the case so that the research in question is purely theoretical and will not lead to any concrete applications. The duty to speak out would, then, be strictly related to the prevention of false beliefs. We can also imagine a modified scenario where the objection specifically targets the epistemic credentials of the belief being challenged. Perhaps the pressure is to say how the belief is wholly without support, or grounded in ignorance, or made up to suit a given aim, as bullshit is.³⁶ I should further note that epistemic and moral pressures can certainly pull in different directions. For instance, there might be some normative pressure to correct the record when I falsely say that my dog is a perfect weight, but there might be far greater moral pressure to not be rude or confrontational.³⁷

We thus have reason for affirmative answers to both of our earlier questions—namely, that the framework of imperfect duties might be useful in understanding the duty to object, and thus that there is support for the more general conclusion that there are imperfect epistemic duties. Let's now take a closer look at a particular conception of imperfect duties.

5. Groups and Compliance

One way of understanding imperfect duties is in collective terms—as belonging to groups rather than to individual agents.³⁸ On this view, the duty to engage in, say, charitable giving is one that is directed at us collectively, as a community or society. Liam Murphy, for instance, proposes what he calls a cooperative conception of beneficence, according to which:

beneficence can be understood in terms of a shared cooperative aim. Let me try to explain the difference between a cooperative aim and an individual or noncooperative aim. If two of us have individual aims to promote the good, what I should do may depend on what you do. For what I can best do to promote the good can vary depending on what you are going to do, and, as already noted, I might be best able to achieve my aim by cooperating, in a secondary way, with you. But if you cannot cooperate, or if you fail to promote the good, this in no way affects my understanding of, or commitment to, my own aim. If we both have a cooperative aim to promote the good, by contrast, we do not see ourselves as engaged in separate solitary enterprises. The other person's relevant behavior affects the attitude of each to his own requirements.

Indeed, we can say that if we all have a cooperative aim to promote the good, each of us does not, strictly speaking, aim to promote the good. Each sees himself as *working with others* to promote the good. Thus the best way to describe the aim of each might be: “to promote the good together with others.” (Murphy 1993, pp. 285-6).

On Murphy's view, then, the duty in question is a collective one and the distribution of each share of responsibility to individual members of the groups is based on what would most promote the good. A central advantage of this cooperative conception of beneficence is that it

provides the resources for responding to a classic objection to act consequentialism: namely, that it is overdemanding. In the face of world poverty, for instance, the obligation of those of us in the First World to promote the good seems to demand that we sacrifice most of our resources for the sake of others, and this strikes many as requiring too much. But according to Murphy, it is typically only in situations of partial compliance with act consequentialism—where not everyone is doing their fair share—that the view is excessively demanding. In cases of full compliance, the view often requires far less of each agent. If, say, everyone in the First World were now doing their part in responding to world poverty, then it is not the case that each of us would have to give up most of our resources for the sake of others.

For Murphy, then, shifting over to understanding beneficence in cooperative terms opens the door to a kind of act consequentialism that does not demand that we take on more when others fail to do their part. In particular, if beneficence is a cooperative project, then “it would be natural to resist taking on, in addition to one’s own share of the burdens of this...project, the shares of noncomplying agents” (Murphy 1993, pp. 267-8). Indeed, Murphy takes the satisfaction of a “Compliance Condition” to be necessary on any principle of beneficence, according to which the demands on agents should not increase as compliance with the principle by other agents decreases. Thus, Murphy’s view ultimately holds that morality should require of each agent no more than it would demand if everyone were fulfilling their duties: “Each agent is required to act optimally to perform the action that makes the outcome best except in situations of partial compliance with this principle. In situations of partial compliance it is permissible to act optimally, but the sacrifice each agent is required to make is limited to the level of sacrifice that would be optimal if the situation were one of full compliance....” (Murphy 1993, p. 280)

While this framework provides some resources for responding to concerns about overdemandingness, it comes at what I take to be a debilitating cost. Consider the following variant of *Rescue*: suppose that you and I are walking past a shallow pond, and we see two children drowning whom we could easily rescue. On Murphy's view, you and I are obligated to do only our fair share here—which we can assume amounts to each of us saving one child—and no more. Suppose further, then, that you run in and save one of the children while I stand by idly watching the situation unfold. If I continue to stand on the shore watching the second child drown, you are now under no obligation to run in and save her, even if it would cost you very little, as that would involve picking up the slack that results from my noncompliance.³⁹ But this seems wildly counterintuitive. Imagine any one of us not criticizing you for your inaction simply because you only had to do your “fair share.”

Responses have been offered to this objection—some of which amount to simply biting the bullet by admitting that your saving the second child would indeed be supererogatory⁴⁰—but none will be able to deal with the core problem that arises via the Compliance Condition. If what each of us is obligated to do is never affected by the compliance, or complete lack thereof, of others, then there will always be variant *Rescue* cases to face. That is, there will be situations in which others fail to do what they're supposed to do and we clearly seem obligated to step up and take on more, especially when doing so comes quite easily to us.

This is no less true when it comes to the duty to object. Suppose that the obligation to challenge false accusations of professional misconduct by my colleagues falls on my department as a group rather than on me individually. Two such accusations—one against Ben and another against Bill—are raised at a social gathering that a fellow department member and I are attending. If I call into question the claim about Ben and my fellow department member remains silent, surely I should speak out about Bill, too. From an epistemic point of view, this is

especially clear if my evidence on behalf of their innocence is equal, or even greater with respect to Bill's. Moreover, it would hardly assuage Bill's anger or sadness or feelings of betrayal for me to say, "Well, I spoke out about Ben, and so I'd done my fair share. It's not my fault that our colleague remained silent."

This raises serious concerns about the inclusion of the Compliance Condition in a conception of imperfect duties—either epistemic or moral; for such a condition is fundamentally at odds with the arguments on behalf of OTHERS offered earlier. But there is also reason to think that this conception of imperfect duties is incompatible with SOCIAL STATUS. To see this, consider the case of Ben and Bill again: our obligations to object seem deeply impacted by a number of under-described features of the case, all of which we might say fall under the distribution of goods, epistemic and otherwise. Are Ben and Bill both tenured? Is either a member of an underrepresented group? Are both department members who are expected to object regarded as equally senior and authoritative? Does either occupy a precarious position within the university because of race, sex, gender, and so on? Imagine, for instance, that Bill is a black, untenured faculty member, while Ben is white and has an endowed chair. My obligation to speak out against a claim that Bill plagiarized seems even greater than it is that Ben did, in part because the risks to Bill are potentially more severe. Similarly, if my fellow department member is, say, untenured and Latina and already feeling vulnerable, then it might be obvious that I ought to challenge the accusations about both Ben and Bill while she remains silent.

Of course, these differences in status could be factored into the initial division of duties among group members. If speaking out would cost you a great deal and me nothing at all, then our obligations may vary at the outset. If challenging false claims against Ben would bring about little that is positive, while doing so in the case of Bill would be the difference between, say, his getting tenure and being terminated, this might be accounted for from the start.⁴¹

But here is the lingering problem for this view of imperfect duties: even if the distribution of goods in part determines the division of obligations among members of groups, compliance, or lack thereof, can redistribute goods in ways that bear on the duties themselves. Suppose that I am the only person in my department to speak out about my colleague sexually harassing one of our graduate students. I'm a senior faculty member and so let's say that I have a greater duty to do this than some others, particularly my less senior colleagues. However, my compliance here, and the lack of it by my colleagues, redistributes some of the relevant goods in ways that matter for our obligations. Upon objecting, my being a senior faculty member may become far less salient than does my being a woman, and this might bear directly on the credibility afforded to me. The fact that I am speaking out about sexual harassment, which women are frequently accused of lying about, might further damage my epistemic and moral reputation. That my colleagues remained silent about this matter might inflate their apparent trustworthiness, as they might be taken to be standing by someone who is being wrongfully accused. I might suffer attacks on social media and trolling as a result, which impact my psychological wellness, and my standing at the university might be threatened. In all of these ways, my compliance and the absence of it by my colleagues are directly connected with our corresponding statuses, which, in turn, impact our obligations.

There is one further problem for the Compliance Condition in relation to the duty to object that I would like to highlight:⁴² doing only my share can make matters worse than not doing anything at all, especially when there is a lack of compliance on the part of others. Suppose that two suspects who are presumed guilty in a recent murder case are placed in front of you and me, and we both know that neither is the man we saw fleeing the scene of the crime. Assuming that there is no reason for anything but an equal division between us, you and I are each obligated to object to one of the men being charged with the murder. Now suppose that I

object to the first suspect being charged, am silent with respect to the second, and you say nothing at all about either. If the police officer knows that we both got an excellent view of the perpetrator, then my objecting to the presumed guilt of only the first suspect might reasonably be regarded as implicating the guilt of the second. Indeed, the implicature that follows from my doing my share might stand with or without your compliance. Thus, my doing my part, according to the Compliance Condition, can make the situation epistemically and morally worse—the authorities might take themselves to have support for their false belief that the second suspect is guilty, which could beget massive additional false beliefs downstream in the courts, the public, and so on; and, the suspect might end up falsely imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit, losing just about everything in life that is valuable.

What all of this shows, then, is that Murphy's model of the imperfect duty of beneficence cannot simply be adapted to understand the duty to object. But notice: all of the objections raised above focus on the Compliance Condition rather than the collective aspect of the view. Might we still take on board the core insight that imperfect duties—specifically, the duty to object—might helpfully be understood in collective terms?⁴³

6. The IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW and the Distribution of Goods

To answer the question from the previous section, I want to start by making a couple of preliminary points.

First, it should be emphasized that even if the duty to object is understood collectively, this does not mean that there are not *also* individual duties to do so. The most obvious are those generated by special relationships, either interpersonal or professional/social. For instance, no matter how many people challenge a false and disparaging claim made about my friend, or partner, or child, and no matter how effective they are at correcting the record, I may have

personal obligations to register my own objection as well. Indeed, the normative force here might be due even more to my being expected to publicly stand by my loved ones and offer them my support than to the need to set the record straight. Similar considerations apply when occupying certain professional or social roles. Even if nearly everyone at my university is disputing a highly distorted characterization of an incident that took place on campus, the President might be expected to formally weigh in, too. Notice that this duty is generated by the President's professional role rather than by his epistemic standing.⁴⁴ It is, for instance, easy to imagine that his epistemic situation in relation to the incident is inferior to many others on campus—he might not have been an eyewitness, or talked directly with any of those involved, or seen all of the relevant documents himself, and so on—and yet his duty to speak out may be far greater. This is because his professional position at the university calls for him to be a spokesperson, especially in times of crisis or confusion, and this role need not track his epistemic position.

The second point worth noting is that groups or collectives can be understood very broadly and heterogeneously. Some groups are highly formal where one becomes a member through appointment or election, such as the Supreme Court of the United States, Congress, and the administration of an institution. Other collectives have a formal structure, but membership is extended through invitation, admission, or “open enrollment,” such as fraternities, schools, and churches. There are some groups without a formal structure where there is no choice about membership, such as children, Latinos, rape victims, and those with Down Syndrome, while others are as voluntary as they come, such as dog owners, stamp collectors, and ethical vegetarians.⁴⁵ Some groups have varying degrees of structure and voluntariness, such as U.S. citizens, cancer survivors, and heart surgeons and some are so broad that the parameters of membership are murky, such as global citizens. Finally, there are some

groups to which we all belong in one form or another—such as being members of the moral or epistemic community.⁴⁶

With respect to the duty to object in particular, membership in one group or another might be more or less *salient* at different times, which can directly impact the normative pressure to speak out in that context. If, for instance, there is a conversation about a highly visible case of sexual assault on my campus, my membership in the Northwestern community is more salient than is my U.S. citizenship, and thus my obligation to say something is greater. In contrast, if I am in Europe and people are talking about Trump, then my being American is more salient than is my connection with Northwestern, and so there is more normative pressure to make clear my resistance to him than there is for, say, a citizen of Brazil.

Now, bracketing individual duties generated by special relationships, and recognizing the wild heterogeneity of groups, if we conceive of the duty to object as a collective one, how should we understand what this amounts to? Here is the start of an answer: recall that on Murphy's view, each member is assigned a share of the obligation based on what would most promote the good—a share that is in no way affected by the compliance of others. I have already argued against this view, but the considerations raised in these arguments point toward a response. How should the shares of responsibility to object in a given collective be distributed? At least in part *on the basis of the goods each member possesses*.

Restricting ourselves to just the epistemic dimension of the collective duty to object for a moment, we might say, first, that *the distribution of epistemic goods among the group's members in part determines the epistemic share each should shoulder*. Epistemic goods here should be understood broadly to include not only the paradigmatic aims of inquiry, such as truth, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and justified belief, but also features that are often connected with the achievement of these aims, such as authority, expertise, and credibility.⁴⁷ So, for example,

suppose that it is the community's collective duty to object to a false and damaging accusation made against one of our members. What is the responsibility that each of us bears? This will depend on who has relevant knowledge about the situation, how well-supported the beliefs in question are, whether we are regarded as authorities on the matter, how much credibility we each have on the topic, how great an epistemic impact our testimony will have, and so on. For instance, those who know more about the situation have a greater obligation to weigh in than do those who are ignorant of the matter; those who understand the details in question have more responsibility than those who don't; and those who are regarded as credible on an issue relevant to the case have a stronger duty than those who aren't.

I earlier talked about objections with traction being themselves a limited good that cannot be used indiscriminately. We can now see that the extent to which we have objections with traction is linked with other goods, many of them epistemic. If I have greater authority or credibility, I will have more objections with traction than someone who doesn't. If I'm regarded as an expert, I will have more platforms, and perhaps more visible ones, at which to use my objections.

It is helpful to see that there is an immediate positive result of this view: understanding the epistemic duty to object in terms of the distribution of epistemic goods increases the likelihood that these very epistemic goods will be promoted. If those with, say, knowledge and authority have more of a responsibility to object than those with false beliefs, and people are doing what they ought to do, then there is a greater chance that knowledge will be promoted.

Of course, given the earlier arguments on behalf of OTHERS and against the Compliance Condition, this is not the end of the story: *the duty to object can be affected by what other members of the community are doing*. This fits very nicely with the obligation being a collective one. If you and I agree to paint someone's house, it is our responsibility to do so. If you don't do your share,

perhaps because of either an emergency or sheer negligence, I have to take on more in order to fulfill the agreement. In other words, I haven't fulfilled my commitment for us to paint your house if I've done only my share and you haven't done yours. For my commitment was not to do *only my share* of our painting your house but, rather, for *us* to paint your house, where there might be many ways for this to be distributed. Similarly, if others in my community are doing more or less than their share in setting the record straight, this directly impacts what my epistemic duty is. Thus, while I might have fewer (or more) epistemic goods than you do on a given occasion, I might have a greater (or lesser) obligation to object, depending on what you're doing.

Note, however, that when I argued on behalf of STATUS, I included broader social statuses beyond merely the epistemic. There are at least two ways in which this figures into the picture I'm sketching here. First, social status often has a direct bearing on epistemic status: white police officers are often afforded greater credibility than black suspects, professionals are often regarded as having more authority than non-professionals, and so on. Thus, the distribution of epistemic goods is often inextricably linked with social status. Second, we are obviously far more than just epistemic beings, and the goods we have go beyond just those with epistemic value. As I said at the start of this paper, the normative pressure to object comes from at least the epistemic and the moral realms, and so the social status of the members in our groups will clearly affect the risks, and the corresponding harms, involved in their speaking out. While I have argued for this at length earlier in the paper, the point that I want to emphasize here is that a general and comprehensive view of the duty to object will include all of the ways in which our place in the broader social world impacts our responsibilities. Thus, while you might have more epistemic goods than I do, your social status might be far less secure than

mine, and so my overall duty to object—which goes beyond just the epistemic dimension—might be greater than yours.

My view, then, is that the duty to object can helpfully be understood as an imperfect one, where this is characterized in collective terms. For the sake of clarity, let's call this the IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW, which can be broadly understood as follows:

IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW: The duty to object is a collective one, where each member's individual share of the responsibility is determined in large part by (i) the distribution of goods, especially social and epistemic statuses, and (ii) whether the other members of the collective do their share. The greater (lesser) the goods, the greater (lesser) the duty; the more (less) that some members do, the less (more) that other members have to do.

I put this in general terms, but the specific epistemic version of the duty to object would restrict the goods and statuses in question to only those with epistemic significance.⁴⁸

To fully appreciate the advantage of understanding the duty to object in collective terms, let's consider an individualist alternative. Suppose that we understand the normative pressure to object as follows:

1. You have the duty to object from an epistemic standpoint if and only if your objection has the uniquely best (expected) consequences, given the epistemic goals of the community.
2. You are permitted to object from an epistemic standpoint if and only if your objection has the best (expected) consequences, given the epistemic goals of the community.⁴⁹

On this model, there are no collective duties to object—just individual ones that aim to promote the epistemic goals in our communities.

But now suppose that at T1, a colleague falsely states at a department meeting that our dean is resigning. Three of us hear it at this time, and we are all equally well-positioned epistemically to bring about the best epistemic consequences through objecting. The individualist view here seems to

face a dilemma. On the one hand, since we are all equally well-positioned epistemically to promote the epistemic goods, we might say that each of us is merely permitted, but not obligated, to object at T1. This is compatible, however, with none of us objecting and not being subject to criticism for our collective silence, which is a problematic result. On the other hand, we might say that since we are all equally well-positioned epistemically, each of us is obligated to object at T1. But imagine that only you object to the racist remark at T1, and the context makes clear that this has been epistemically sufficient to correct the record. You have satisfied your obligation at T1, but my other colleague and I have flouted ours at this time. This, too, is the wrong result, since it fails to capture the core insight of OTHERS; namely, that what other members of the community do can directly impact what I ought to do. Otherwise put, on the individualist view, you discharged your duty to object at T1, while my other colleague and I flouted ours at this time. On my view, we collectively discharged our duty at T1 through you objecting to the racist remark at T1. Only mine seems to deliver the correct result here; namely, that someone is required to object at T1, but that the duty for all three of us can be discharged by only one of us doing so.

I should note that it isn't always the case that a single objection will suffice for discharging a collective duty to object. Sometimes, more than one member will need to object, and other times every member will need to do so. How do we determine what is required in a given context? The short answer is that if the epistemic aim has been achieved, then no further objections are necessary. So, for example, if the goal is to correct the record, and one member objecting adequately accomplishes this, then no further objections are needed. However, since we can't always tell whether an epistemic aim has been met, a helpful principle that might be used in trying to determine when to object is this: the more resistant to evidence a belief is, the more objections will be needed to achieve the epistemic goal in question. If, for instance, my colleague had instead expressed a racist

belief rather than one about our dean resigning, almost certainly every one of us should have objected because such a belief is standardly very evidence-resistant.⁵⁰

Notice that the IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW identifies (i) and (ii) as *largely* determining the individual shares of the collective duty to object, but it might be asked what other features are relevant here. While I won't attempt a settled answer to this question, it will be helpful to mention a few candidates. An obvious one is stakes—for instance, my duty to object seems to be sensitive to the potential harms (epistemic and moral) at issue. Even if I lack social privilege to the point where I wouldn't otherwise have a share of the duty to object, the fact that the stakes are very high might make a difference. Someone who is poor and incarcerated might have an obligation to speak up against a false allegation that his cellmate is plotting an escape, even in the face of his lack of privilege and other goods. Another candidate is the expected impact or consequences (epistemic and moral) of the objection. If I know that I have a highly visible platform, or that I have considerable authority on an issue, my testimony is likely to bring about significant results, which, in turn, could put greater pressure on me to object. Still another candidate is history—my duty to object might be impacted by my history of objecting. If I object every time there has been a student at my university who has been subject to accusations of lying when bringing a complaint of sexual harassment, my silence in the face of a new accusation might be far more significant than that of others, even if I have already done more than my share. In this way, I might have a share of the collective duty to object that I wouldn't have had, were my history subtracted from the circumstances.

Another point that should be addressed concerns the worry about over-demandingness which, it might be recalled, is one of the motivations for the inclusion of the Compliance Condition. Given that I reject this condition and, in fact, explicitly grant that we may need to pick up the epistemic and moral slack of others, the natural question to ask here is whether the

IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW has the resources to meet the over-demandingness constraint, according to which there is a limit to how great a sacrifice epistemology and morality can legitimately demand of agents. By way of response, let me say at the outset that I will only gesture at an answer that blunts the force of this worry, and so a fuller discussion will have to wait for another time. But I do think it is worth noting a couple of points here. First, conditions (i) and (ii) of the IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW can pull in different directions, thereby keeping one another in check. In particular, while (ii) might require that I pick up the epistemic and moral slack of others, (i) makes clear that the duties to object are always affected by the distribution of goods. It follows fairly straightforwardly from this, then, that those with, say, less power and authority will often be expected to do less, and so the demands on them will be reined in by the limited nature of these goods, even when others aren't complying. So, the more pressing worry is about over-demandingness with respect to those who have a significant amount of goods, since more of the burden to object will fall on the shoulders of those with privilege. This is where the second point comes in: given that the duty to object is a collective one, the burden is distributed, even among those with an excess of goods. Sometimes, for instance, our colleagues will do far more than their share of objecting, leaving us with freedom to focus on other matters of importance, while at other times we might have to carry a heavier load than anyone else in the context. But given the prevalence of disagreement, most of us find ourselves in contexts and communities where there is not a shortage of objections, and so there is no reason to think that the view developed here will be excessively demanding of any one of us.

7. Conclusion

My central aim in this paper has been to show that the framework for understanding imperfect duties can be helpfully applied in the epistemic realm, particularly with respect to the duty to

object. A key virtue of the IMPERFECT DUTY VIEW is that it appreciates the complexity of our places and relations in the social world and the impact these features can have on our obligations. While there is still much to be explored on these and related topics, the view developed here provides a model for how tools in ethics can be brought to bear on important questions in epistemology.⁵¹

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¹ For reasons that will become apparent later in the paper, I will talk about there being the "duty" to object. But for those who don't like talk of duties, this can be substituted with "obligations," "demands," "normative force," or "normative pressure," which I will often use interchangeably with duties.

² I should note at the outset that my aim in this paper is not to defend the ethical framework that I am drawing on, such as the view that there are perfect and imperfect duties, that promise-keeping is a paradigmatic instance of the former while charity is an example of the latter, and so on. To do so lies far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I will be relying on this framework in ethics, one that is widely, though certainly not universally, accepted to explore the extent to which it can be fruitfully applied in the

epistemic realm. For those who reject it, there might still be differences between those duties that are standardly regarded as perfect and imperfect that could usefully shed light on the duty to object.

³ I should note that while I'm restricting the scope of the discussion here for the sake of clarity, the view developed in this paper clearly has direct application to objections that go beyond the propositional content of what is said. In particular, I might have the duty to object to *what you're doing*, and the normative pressure can be either moral or epistemic. For instance, I have the moral duty to object, both if you make a racist remark and if you make a non-racist remark, but in blackface. Similarly, I have the epistemic duty to object both if you say that Whole Foods is to the left and if you don't say this, but you put your left-hand directional on in the car. In such cases, it is clear that the moral and epistemic duties to object can apply not only to the propositional content of our assertions, but also to our actions. (I'm grateful to Karen Bennett for this point.)

⁴ Principles of this sort are prevalent in the literature on moral obligations, but perhaps the most well-known is found in Singer (1972).

⁵ It may be thought that this dimension is captured by the practice of assertion being governed by an epistemic norm, and thus that mere rumors lack properties that they ought to have in order to be proper in this sense, such as reasonableness or truth or being known. (Proponents of the Knowledge Norm governing assertion include Unger (1975), Brandom (1983 and 1994), Williamson (1996 and 2000), Adler (2002), DeRose (2002), Reynolds (2002), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2005). Cohen (2004) says that he is "not unsympathetic" to the view. For a defense of the Truth Norm, see Weiner (2005) and Whiting (2013). See Douven (2006) for the Rational Credibility Norm; Lackey (2007) for the Reasonable-to-Believe Norm; Kvanvig (2009) and McKinnon (2013) for the Supportive Reasons Norm; and Goldberg (2015) for the Context-Sensitive Norm.) But this can't explain the epistemic pressure that there is to object. To see this, notice that a speaker might satisfy whatever norm or norms govern assertion, and yet hearers might still have the duty to object to what is said. Let's return to the plagiarism case at the start of this paper and assume, for the sake of illustration, that a norm of reasonableness governs assertion: you might have compelling evidence on behalf of the accusation against your colleague, and hence it might be reasonable for you to believe and thus assert that he plagiarized. However, I might know that the evidence supporting the charge is misleading;

perhaps it was misrepresented or fabricated. Here I seem obligated to object to your report that a colleague plagiarized even though you satisfy the norm governing assertion in offering it. Indeed, imagine that I don't say anything at all—I remain silent in the face of your accusation—and the other members of the department later learn of the relevant details. Clearly, my failure to have raised a challenge would elicit serious disapproval from my colleagues.

Similar cases can be constructed involving other norms of assertion, such as truth or knowledge. Suppose, for instance, that you know that a colleague plagiarized a crucial passage in his book and thus assert that this is so. Suppose, further, however, that I have very compelling, though misleading, evidence that the charge has been fabricated. Here I seem obligated to object to your testimony even though you have the relevant knowledge and satisfy the presumed norm governing assertion. One way to appreciate the normative force here is that this scenario and the one in which your charge of plagiarism is in fact false are completely indistinguishable from my perspective. Indeed, the evidence that the claim has been fabricated might even be stronger in the case in which I possess the knowledge in question, and thus there may even be greater pressure to object when knowledge is absent

Even more importantly, however, the norm of assertion might explain why, or when, it is *permissible* to criticize a speaker for what is said, but it fails to capture why, or when, it is *obligatory* for a hearer to object to what is said. In this way, such a norm focuses on the epistemic behavior of *speakers* and when they are subject to criticism, when what is at issue are the epistemic actions of *bearers* and when they are blameworthy. So, we need to look elsewhere to understand the epistemic force to object.

⁶ In the epistemological literature, there is surprisingly little work devoted specifically to the topic of our epistemic duties *to others*. The literature on testimony focuses on our obligations as speakers, but rarely is this framed in terms of responsibilities that involve the epistemic needs of those around us. A rare exception is Jason Kawall's (2002).

⁷ Source: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/welcome-to-donald-trumps-post-fact-america-w452917>, accessed 7 December 2016.

⁸ Source: <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-09-22/trump-lies-and-the-media-need-to-call-him-out-every-time>, accessed 7 December 2016.

⁹ Source: <http://www.nature.com/news/take-the-time-and-effort-to-correct-misinformation-1.21106>, accessed 7 December 2016.

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/25/facebook-fake-news-fight-mark-zuckerberg>, accessed on 7 December 2016.

¹¹ Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/17/facebook-fake-news-writer-i-think-donald-trump-is-in-the-white-house-because-of-me/?utm_term=.47a744f08383, accessed on 7 December 2016.

¹² See Murphy (1993, p. 268).

¹³ See, for instance, Kvanvig (2003).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Railton (1984), Conly (1985), and Murphy (1993).

¹⁵ I say “especially” rather than “only” those in the conversational context because I want to remain neutral on how precisely such contexts ought to be individuated. For instance, even if one wants to say that I am not part of the national conversational context about current politics, I want to leave room for my duty to object to Trump’s views nonetheless being affected by what those who are part of that conversational context are saying.

¹⁶ There are many explanations for this. T.M. Scanlon (1998), for instance, maintains that promising involves the promiser giving assurance to the promisee to perform, or refrain from performing, some action. This then generates expectations in the promisee about the promiser, and so breaking the promise involves deception, which one has moral obligations to avoid doing. When I promise to visit Rose in the hospital, then, I give assurance to her about what I will do, and thus Bill’s actions simply don’t bear on the expectations she rightfully has about me. According to Stephen Darwall (2006a and 2006b), there is a special “second-personal” character of promissory obligation such that the obligation to keep a promise is owed specifically to the promisee. Thus, when I break my promise to Rose on this view, I am *wronging Rose in particular* rather than simply committing a wrongful act. This explains why what Bill does fails to affect my

duties. In making a promise to Rose, I incur a duty that only I can fulfill. According to David Owens (2006 and 2007), making a promise grants authority to the promisee to decide how the promiser will act. When I break my promise to Rose, I wrong her on this view in failing to respect the authority I granted to her in deciding that I shall visit her in the hospital. This authority that she has with respect to me, however, is in no way impacted by what others are doing, such as Bill. And more recently, Daniel Friedrich and Nicholas Southwood (2011) argue that obligations are incurred through promising by virtue of the promiser inviting the promisee to trust her. As they say, “According to the Trust View, promising involves bringing into existence a special kind of relationship between promiser and promisee. In making a promise, it is specifically the promisee whose trust one has invited; and in breaking a promise, it is specifically the promisee whose trust one has betrayed” (2011, p. 282). Thus, I betray Rose’s trust in breaking my promise to her, regardless of what Bill does. Despite all of these different accounts of the normative force of promising, they are all in agreement that the duty involved in promise-keeping is fundamentally *nonsocial* in that it is unaffected by the actions of those others than the promiser and promisee. I will say more about what it means for a duty to be nonsocial later in the paper.

¹⁷ I will be talking about duties as if they come in degrees. For instance, I will speak about duties being greater, more pressing, diminished, and so on. This way of framing matters is intended to capture the intuitive point that normative pressures vary. For instance, there is greater normative pressure for me to save my daughter from drowning than there is for me to keep my promise to put the lid on the jar of peanut butter. If talk of duties coming in degrees is problematic for some, it can be substituted with “normative pressure” or the like.

¹⁸ I say much of the force derives from this more general duty at least in part because there are duties to object generated by special relationships. For instance, even if five of my colleagues speak out against an accusation of plagiarism directed at my best friend, I may still have the duty to object to this charge in virtue of our friendship, even if my doing so prevents no additional harm than is already prevented by my colleagues’ objections. I will address this point in greater detail later in the paper.

¹⁹ As should be clear, I am assuming neither that the promotion of truth is the only epistemic aim, nor that all epistemic aims are consequential in nature.

It is also worth mentioning that epistemic aims can be both short-term and long-term. Suppose, for instance, that two colleagues have the same area of research specialization, but different levels of social status—one is a young, female assistant professor, while another is a senior, male distinguished faculty member with numerous publications. Let's stipulate that the senior faculty member has more true beliefs in the area in question simply because he has had more years to do research. If the goal were simply the maximization of true beliefs in the community in the short-term, it would follow that the senior faculty member is obligated to object nearly every time something false or unwarranted is said because his objections would bring about more true beliefs than those of his junior colleague's. However, it is important to notice that there are epistemic goals besides the maximization of true beliefs, particularly in the short-term. The junior colleague should at least be offered the opportunity to object in some cases, both to build up a track-record of credibility and to develop a positive reputation within her professional community. This would enable her to make epistemic contributions with appropriate receptivity, which will maximize true beliefs in the long-term since, for instance, her colleague cannot be everywhere at once, will presumably retire long before she does, and so on. Thus, even if objections from those with lower social status are often supererogatory, the overall flourishing of the epistemic community would not be achieved by only the most powerful and expert among us objecting.

²⁰ Source: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/11/why-online-allies-matter-in-fighting-harassment/507722/>, accessed 7 December 2016.

²¹ Of course, there is also often a greater cost for those who speak out against those who have more power than they have. In discussing whistleblowing, for instance, Peggy DesAutels writes, "Those with power use the race, class, and gender of resisters in a variety of ways, depending on the circumstances, as marginalizing strategies. In some cases, gender becomes more salient, in others race, and in others class. And of course, all three overlap in complex ways.... If a whistleblower has socially-marginalized traits, these traits are sure to elicit trait-specific retaliatory measures as a way to emphasize just how much the whistleblower always has

been and always will be marginalized in our society—as a way to emphasize that the whistleblower was never *really* an insider after all” (2009, p. 231). Similarly, Lisa Tessman argues that resisting oppression often involves what she calls “burdened virtues”: “What I think of as the *burdened virtues* include all those traits that make a contribution to human flourishing—if they succeed in doing so at all—*only* because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression (it is in this that their nobility lies), while in other ways they detract from their bearer’s well-being, in some cases so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life” (2005, p. 95).

²² This is one of the benefits of understanding charity in terms of maxims or dispositions. (See Kant (XXXX) for a maxim view. See Weiss (1985) for a dispositional view of gratitude and Miller (2004) for such a view of beneficence, both of which provide the framework for understanding charity in dispositional terms.) If satisfying the duty of charity involves the performing of acts, then the very poor will either typically fail to satisfy it or it simply won’t apply to them at all. In contrast, on a maxim or dispositional view, agents can be assessed in terms of their attitudes, and thus the very poor may be prepared or disposed to help others, even if the appropriate circumstances never arise.

²³ I am using “objections with traction” and “effective objections” interchangeably here.

²⁴ Of course, I might also become known as an expert on the topic, and my concerns might be given even greater weight.

²⁵ For a helpful discussion of the distinction between rejecting and ignoring testimony, see Wanderer (2012). For work on “silencing,” see Hornsby (1985) and Langton (1993)

²⁶ I am grateful to Sandy Goldberg for this objection.

²⁷ For more on defeaters, see Lackey (2008).

²⁸ Stapleford (2013) also argues on behalf of imperfect epistemic duties, but he does so in the context of maintaining that the duty we have to proportion our beliefs to the evidence might be helpfully understood as an imperfect epistemic duty in Kant’s sense. He then appeals to this move to reject Nelson’s (2010) claim that there are no positive epistemic duties.

²⁹ Of course, latitude might be built directly into the *content* of a promise. I might, for instance, promise to Rose that someone in my family will visit her in the hospital this week, which might be fulfilled by my visiting her on Monday, or my daughter visiting her on Tuesday, and so on. But this is a separate point than latitude being tied to the fulfillment of the duty itself.

³⁰ See, for instance, Price (1974). See Stocker (1967) for an argument that virtually all duties are infinitely disjunctive, and hence this cannot adequately capture imperfect ones.

³¹ For the original discussion of these two kinds of cases, see Singer (1972).

³² Of course, Singer himself denies this.

³³ The third criterion that Schroeder claims any account of imperfect duties should satisfy is below, though it won't figure directly into my discussion:

SPECIFICATION. *An account of imperfect duties should precisely identify what is required, what an agent must do.*

(Schroeder 2013, p. 559)

³⁴ Since I am this point interested in exploring whether it makes sense to talk about imperfect epistemic duties, I will in what follows focus almost entirely on the epistemic, rather than the moral, pressure to object.

³⁵ Kamm (2004) argues that geographical proximity can make a moral difference because “as the costs involved in acting go up, a duty to aid a distant person may be defeated whereas a duty to aid a near person would not be” (2004, p. 70).

³⁶ See Frankfurt (2005).

³⁷ I'm assuming here that my dog is not dangerously overweight.

³⁸ See, for instance, Cohen (1981), Murphy (1993 and 2003), and Schroeder (2013). I should make clear that understanding imperfect duties in collective terms is one model, and it has certain advantages, but everything I have said thus far in this paper could be combined with another conception of imperfect duties, so long as it can adequately capture the central features of the duty to object.

³⁹ This sort of case is discussed in Singer (1972), Cohen (1981), Murphy (1993 and 2003), and Schroeder (2013).

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Cohen (1981) and Murphy (1993 and 2003).

⁴¹ Similarly, in *Rescue*, if you can swim while I cannot, you may be obligated from the beginning to save both of the drowning children.

⁴² I am grateful to Jeffrey Sanford Russel for a helpful conversation here.

⁴³ Notice that I deliberately speak of “collective” duties rather than “cooperative” ones. This is because the latter, but not the former, seems intimately connected with issues of compliance, which is precisely what I am rejecting.

⁴⁴ This distinction will become salient later in the paper.

⁴⁵ To be clear, I mean here the group that includes all children, the group that includes all Latinos, and so on.

⁴⁶ I develop this in greater detail in my (unpublished).

⁴⁷ It should be noted that with all of these goods, there is a difference between the possession of them, and the recognition that they are possessed. One might in fact be an expert on a given topic, for instance, but I want to say that it is a further epistemic good to be recognized as an expert. This is because the recognition enables one to play a critical role in the epistemic community by producing knowledge in others.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that features that are not themselves epistemic in nature might nonetheless have epistemic significance. For instance, as mentioned earlier, social status often contributes directly to the credibility that someone is afforded.

⁴⁹ I’m grateful to Nilanjan Das for raising this concern.

⁵⁰ I’m grateful to Amy Seymour for a conversation that led to the inclusion of this point.

⁵¹ For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to Nilanjan Das, Lizzie Fricker, Helen Frowe, Sandy Goldberg, Lauren Leydon-Hardy, Ofra Magidor, Trevor Nyman, Kathryn Pogin, Baron Reed, Amy Seymour, Tim Williamson, and audience members at the University of Oxford, Stockholm University, Miami University, the Workshop on Groups and Disagreement at the University of Copenhagen, the Rutgers Epistemology Conference, and the Ranch Metaphysics Workshop.