The Duty to Object

Jennifer Lackey
Northwestern University

We have the duty 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. In this paper, my aim is to explore in greater depth how to best understand this duty. I begin by 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 context or community do, but also by the social status of the agent in question. I then show that these features are shared by the duty to be charitable, and the similarities between these two duties point to a potentially deeper explanation: while promise-keeping is regarded as a classic perfect duty, charity is an imperfect one. I then show how the duty to object can be modeled on a particular conception of imperfect duties, one that takes the distribution of goods, including epistemic goods, to be central.