

The Duty to Object claim (DTO) has been discussed and defended prominently in recent epistemological literature (Lackey 2018, Johnson 2018, Joshi 2021), with compelling reason to think that we are (at least *sometimes*) required to object to speech or behaviour that is *objectionable* (i.e., misleading, harmful, or dangerous). However, while the imperfect nature implies that there are times when we are not compelled or required to comply, it is not often discussed that objecting is not the only way to respond to objectionable speech or behaviour.

If we only have a duty to object *sometimes* then, surely, we must also sometimes have a duty or duties *not* to object. I will discuss the most common epistemic considerations in favour of DTO, as well as three moral considerations and three constraints, before suggesting that there are competing pressures to respond to objectionable speech and behaviour in various ways as well as merely objecting.

Typically, DTO is motivated because objecting tends to promote or achieve the following epistemic goods:

1. *Mitigation of epistemic injustices* and promoting or amplifying underrepresented voices (Fricker 2007).
2. Fostering honesty, integrity, accountability, and *trust in collaborative pursuits* (Elgin 2011).
3. Ensuring and maintaining *free speech* (Mill 1859).

The first two are fairly uncontroversial, since we are interdependent and reliant on each other in information networks and group endeavours, so we must be able to count on each other in sincerely saying when we think something has gone wrong. It's less than clear how the move from free speech as an entitlement to objecting as a requirement may go, however. The best I can surmise is that objecting exercises and ensures the continuity of free speech.

Arguably, there are moral considerations that could motivate DTO as well, namely:

1. A duty to *prevent harm* to others and ourselves.
2. A duty to *aid* or *benefit* others.
3. A duty to *educate* or *guide* others.

The first two seem uncontroversial, are generally granted as imperfect moral duties, and would easily be fulfilled by objecting to controversial, inciteful, or misleading behaviour and speech. The third is less certain, since it's not perhaps an explicitly agreed-upon principle that we are responsible for the moral development and behaviour of other people. Morally immature agents are reliant on others, but if we (competent, considerate moral agents) are only required to guide or educate others when *requested* (or as a role-related obligation), DTO seems precarious.

However, speakers will often express their opinions whether or not it is requested, so why should the question of permissibility be raised only when we are correcting others? Educating or correcting others can be expressed in much the same way as objecting ("You're wrong!"), but what follows is some further conversational exchange, likely intended to convince, persuade, or establish consensus. A simple argument might be offered that says *if* we don't have a duty to educate or guide others (including by objecting) then all moral agents are left to their own devices, which risks immoral action *en masse*, or a heavy reliance on moral luck. As such, it seems uncontroversial to say that we have at least *some* moral responsibility for others.

Granting this, and bearing in mind that DTO only argues for an *imperfect duty* (or perhaps a Rossian *prima facie* duty), we can suggest caveats and say that DTO holds only when the following constraints are absent:

1. *Safety* to object.
2. *Utility* of objecting.
3. *Desire* to object.

Sometimes objecting is unsafe, free speech is an unequally distributed luxury. Other times it is futile to express dissent, speakers and opponents can be *epistemically insouciant*. Other times still, we simply don't have the desire to object, either for reasons relating to the speaker, or because of reasons relating to us as the dissenter.

However, I'm not sure these are all-out defeating arguments against DTO, but general issues with objecting and other related acts. They might indicate cases where refraining from objecting is excused, but importantly, there are other ways to respond to objectionable speech and behaviour, which I argue also stand to be imperfect duties that compete with the duty to object. The following examples suggest as much:

Angry Customer: In a restaurant, a customer criticizes their dinner as being overcooked and makes an offensive comment about the chef who has prepared the dinner.

Angry Regular: In a restaurant, a frequent customer makes an offensive comment within a conversation they are having, which you overhear and challenge.

Angry Drunk Customer: In a restaurant, a customer is out with a group of friends and is highly intoxicated. You, an employee, have refused to continue serving them, and they are getting argumentative as a result.

These are intended to show that we can feel competing pressures to respond and to refrain, but also that we can respond in ways other than *merely* objecting. As well as objecting, we have the following options:

1. *Engaging* or educating the speaker.
2. *Heckling* the speaker or responding with a *sarcastic* retort.
3. *Silencing* or *no-platforming* the speaker.
4. *Venting* to a third party (Callard 2021).

Whether these are all competing lesser duties or jointly constitute a more general duty *not* to object is, I argue, neither here nor there, and likewise whether our ultimate choice overrides or is something like an *all-things-considered* duty. Regardless, I argue that these compete with the duty to object and show that the scope of DTO is too narrow. There is no silver bullet for dealing with objectionable speech and behaviour, no ultimate response or answer that will solve every case, and indeed sometimes we will choose an option that we believe to be more effective but turns out to be wrong.

Regardless, I've defended the compelling argument that we have a duty to object, motivated by epistemic considerations and the pursuit of epistemic goods. I've also developed DTO by suggesting that various moral considerations support it as well. However, I've argued that the scope of DTO doesn't go far enough, that it overlooks the fact that objecting is only one response among various to objectionable speech and behaviour.

Any claim in favour of an imperfect duty to act in some way must grant that there is also an imperfect duty compelling us to refrain from acting in such a way. Considering the various ways we could respond instead of *merely* objecting, it seems that those who grant the duty to object must concede that there is also at least a duty *not* to object.

The Duty to Object and Duties *Not* to Object – Joel Yalland (University of Kent/NCH London)
European Epistemology Network 2022 Meeting, University of Glasgow

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