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## Silence as an Argument in the Reasoning of Social Groups

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### *Sosyal Grupların Akıl Yürütmesinde Bir Argüman Olarak Sessizlik*

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**Abstract:** Basing on the interdisciplinary connections between social anthropology, social epistemology, and theory of argumentation authors consider the latter as a modern trend that induces researchers to focus on the comprehension of the logic and strategy of actions of individuals and social groups and describes practical scenarios for the complex contexts in which agents interact with each other to obtain reliable and probable knowledge. Leaning on the ambivalence of silence as an argument, the specificity of its use is demonstrated in the examples of wedding rituals of various traditions, which made it possible to determine its role in the argumentative schemes of reasonings of groups as social units. Authors proposed to distinguish between an argument to silence and an argument from silence that may serve as the basis for determining the role of silence in the process of implementing an argumentative function.

**Keywords:** Silence, social groups, collective epistemology, argument to silence, argument from silence, wedding.

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## Introduction

Contemporary conceptual and theoretical developments of social epistemology are aimed at researching the problems of social conditionality of knowledge and cognition, and the peculiarity of the approach is to study social practices in terms of their influence on the process of knowledge acquisition. As a philosophical field, it collaborates in a format of interdisciplinarity with a wide range of social, humanitarian, and cognitive sciences, including social anthropology. The commonality of the subject of social epistemology and social anthropology is to understand the logic and strategy of action of individuals (individual epistemic agents) and social groups (collective epistemic agents), and methodological interaction aims at analyzing and understanding social connections through the behavioral relationships. It should be noted that the practice of socio-anthropological research has always felt the influence of the general cognitive situation on the ideal of the standards of scientificity, this influence can be traced from the positivist influence to its critique in variants of interpretive and cognitive anthropology.

Among the research vectors of social epistemology, as a theoretical and methodological basis, we shall highlight Alvin I. Goldman's social epistemic (Goldman, 2004), which focuses on the study of the influence of social practices on the truth values of the beliefs of subjects; theory of aggregation of judgments by Christian List and Philip Pettit (List and Pettit, 2011) as the justification for the mechanism of unification of individual beliefs into relevant collective ones; Jennifer Lackey's thinking experiments (Lackey, 2014); philosophical-epistemological work of Ilya Kasavin (Kasavin, 2016), whose works contain the investigation of a number of problems connected with understanding the problems of cognitive communication and collective subject, and others.

Although social epistemology retains continuity with traditional epistemology and its problems, it focuses the research on interest in practical life and describes scenarios for complex contexts in which epistemic agents interact to obtain and accumulate reliable and credible knowledge. Therefore, the values of knowledge, reliability, trust, agreement or disagreement are at the heart of current research. One of the areas of research of this problem is also the theory of argumentation, which intro-



duces a wide range of contexts to scientific consideration. Studying different types of arguments, in particular, the theory of argumentation considers silence as an argument, based on such its aspect as being able to be an element of conscious strategy and tactics of behavior. Silence itself, as an element of social practices, is associated with the typical tasks of social epistemology.

Modern scientific literature considers the phenomenon of silence in its various aspects. As a special form of communication, silence has repeatedly been the subject of research of linguists, psychologists, and philosophers. As a kind of argument (the so-called *argumentum ex silentio*), silence was investigated by: John Lange (Lange, 1966), who, analyzing historiography texts, noted its value as a historical argument; Douglas Walton (Walton, 1999), who analyzed the *ex silentio* argument as a variant of the *ad ignorantiam* argument; Christopher Stephens (Stephens, 2011), who has applied a Bayesian approach to absent evidence reasoning, which explains knowledge nature produced by observing silence in such arguments; Mike Duncan (Duncan, 2012), who offered the interpretative and explanatory structure of the *ex silentio* argument; Timothy McGrew (McGrew, 2014), who proposed a new analysis using a Bayesian probabilistic framework that isolates the most problematic step in such arguments; Haig Khatchadourian (Khatchadourian, 2015), in whose monograph was explored a range of topics related to silence, including the theory of silence and its relation to other forms of actions and communication, silence and aesthetics, ethics and politics of silence, and religious dimensions of silence; Zachary Milstead (Milstead, 2018), who demonstrated how one can judge the epistemic value of such arguments, and so on. In the context of analyzing the various functions of silence, Michal Ephratt considered the speaker's silence as a speech act (Ephratt, 2008: 1920-1923), and in the process of investigating the metalinguistic function of silence, examined metalinguistic categories that demonstrate the role of the eloquent silence in this function, in particular, different category, that is, the silence of 'the right to silence' (Ephratt, 2008: 1928-1932). When explaining the argument from ignorance in terms of the presumption of innocence, Petar Bodlović addressed to *ex silentio* in his footnotes, investigating the features of appeals to ignorance in char-



acteristic dialogue fragments (Bodlović, 2019: 17).

In this article, we will not focus on the problems of analysis or using the argument from silence (*ex silentio*). In this article, we will not focus on the problems of analysis, using the argument from silence (*ex silentio*). In view of the above, we will uncover the potential of silence as an argument in the reasoning of groups as social units in the contexts of the practical existence of humans. We will proceed from the fact that the consideration of silence as a specific manifestation of human activity when considering it as an argument in the strategy of action of individuals and social groups reveals the commonality of the subject of investigation of social epistemology and social anthropology.

The purpose of this article is by focusing on the argumentative potential of social epistemology, to determine the role of silence as an argument in the reasoning of groups as social units, demonstrating the specificity of its use in the wedding rituals of different traditions.

### **The Phenomenon of Group Knowledge and Silence as an Argument**

There are different dimensions and justifications for the “sociality” of epistemic activity. Within this study, we will turn to the interpersonal and collective (group) dimension (Goldman and O'Connor, 2019). The first is the assessment of the epistemic quality of individual agents' doxastic attitudes or the social nature of the justifications regarding the agent. The second dimension is the collective (group) sociality, when the epistemic agent is collective (group), and it is about revealing the epistemic quality of collective (group) doxastic attitudes when collective agents make judgments on behalf of all members, and hence it is about the measure of collectivity as a researched social.

In traditional epistemology, the epistemic agent is the individual. Non-classical social epistemologists consider as an epistemic agent a group that represents a multitude of meanings and is the creator of belief and knowledge. The term “group” or “collective” is used to refer to institutionally designed or informal group structures and units that may be epistemic agents as carriers of collective knowledge. Group epistemology, or the epistemology of collective beliefs, is a particular trend in contemporary research. Interaction and communication are those social practic-



es that represent social-epistemological connections. Focusing on group knowledge requires the perception of the group / collective as legitimate epistemic carriers of knowledge or substantiated beliefs. However, there is a caveat: it is known that with the increase in the number of individuals, the margin of error increases, reflecting the neglect of some individual judgments.

The condition for recognizing a group as an epistemic agent is to provide such behavior examples that reliably provide rational conditions. The controversial one in the research is the question of the correctness of the statement “epistemic properties of the group”, as well as the possibility of justifying the groups as epistemic agents. Of course, in today's context, most epistemic tasks are solved by groups rather than by individuals (e.g., the activity of committees, organizations, public associations, expert hearings, etc.). Epistemologists, therefore, seek to shift the focus from general practice to social belief-forming practices, which involve the engagement of additional cognitive actions, argumentative schemes, and procedures. For example, reconciliation or “aggregation” procedures (List and Pettit, 2011) as a mechanism for reconciling individual beliefs or judgments and transforming them into appropriate collective ones that are approved by the group.

In the theory of judgments aggregation Christian List (List, 2011: 221-241) justifies the processes of group judgments reconciliation and following in the judgments specific truths. The researcher proposes to consider group knowledge and group rationality in the context of the problem of the “aggregate” perspective of reconciliation of judgments as a mechanism of unification of cognition subjects, which begins with individual beliefs and ends with the provision of collective belief. Therefore, the researcher is interested in individuals' agreement on judgments on the same issues, aimed at seeking consent in group cognitive processes. Aggregation procedure is an epistemological task for a group / collective organization and a mechanism for aggregating the individual beliefs of group members into collective knowledge. However, if the mechanisms of agreement with the judgments of other agents in individual internal cognitive actions may be hidden for some time, then in group actions they become explicit and actual.



Let us consider the situation of difficulty or inability to reach an agreed, aggregated judgment. We have already mentioned above that there was a caveat of the margin of error increasing that would reflect the possible neglect of individual judgments. There are other dangers, such as the problem of disagreement of epistemically equal individuals: how is it possible to support your own opinion in a situation where there is a possibility of being right for another person? The point is that when two people even share the same testimony, it is possible for one person to accept one doxastic attitude toward it, and for the other person to accept another attitude. The question is to determine which argumentation can be trusted and to respond rationally in a situation of disagreement with the subject's own position (Lackey, 2014).

“Disagreement agents” use not only the potential of intellectual or argumentative resources but very often mutual accusations and suspicion. This indicates that the basis is not a received grounded knowledge or reasoned position, but rather such epistemological and anthropological elements as faith, trust or distrust, intolerance. The social epistemology approach is relevant to understanding the epistemological, moral, and psychological features of any field of human interaction where consent and disagreement are present. Therefore, the epistemologist's initial goal is to offer a critical and, at the same time, constructive analysis to justify the possibility of dialogue between different perspectives.

Dialogical argumentation is the platform through which the realization of intersubjective relationships takes place, which gives rise to the knowledge gained through communication with other people. In such an argumentation, information is conveyed in various ways. One of the ways of non-verbal transmission of information, and therefore a form of thought expression, is silence, which is a component of the social aspect of being human. It is about communicatively meaningful silence, that is, what is conscious and deliberately used by the sender, implies that the recipient is aware of the deliberate nature of the silence and that the sender and recipient have a general knowledge of the meaning of silence (Pocheptsov, 1986).

Scientists that work in the realms of logic and theory of argumentation, the epistemology of science, believe that argument from silence is a



weak argument in argumentation, that is, in which its premise provides weak support for the conclusion. It is about an argument from silence, which is mostly used in applied history, that is, in which the conclusion is based not on the presence but on the absence of historical documents. Dependence on negative/missing evidence makes both the usage of such an argument and its evaluation subjective. This argument is considered weak because of an unclear threshold of provability. Based on three criteria for evaluating the arguments - relevance, acceptability, sufficiency proposed by Ralph H. Johnson and J. Anthony Blair (Johnson and Blair, 1994), the assessment of the admissibility of that argument is difficult. The question is: In what sense is this argument credible?

In this article we will focus on the act of silence as an argument, rather than the argument from silence, in which "silence seems to signify, for what is not said by someone's sentences, the contrary of what is said" (Canale and Tuzet, 2008: 33). The term "argument from silence" in this article is used to consider a situation where silence acts as a way of forming our understanding of other's (opponent) point of view.

### **Silence in the Wedding Practices in Different Traditions**

While doing the analysis of the phenomenon of silence in argumentative practices, we should distinguish between argument to silence, when silence is used as a way to argument one's point of view, and argument from silence, when in the process of argumentation (or in its analysis) silence acts as a way of forming our understanding of another's point of view (opponent). This may be the basis for determining the role of silence in the process of its implementation of the argumentative function. Let us illustrate this with examples of wedding rituals of different traditions.

An example of the implementation of the argumentative, and therefore also informative, volitional, metalinguistic functions of silence in argumentative practices is the group silence of people present during wedding ceremonies in Christian and Muslim traditions. The problem of the silence of people present during the marriage ceremony in these traditions was investigated in a theme-related article (Shcherbyna and Shashkova, 2019: 80-81). In Christianity, there is a tradition that already existed in the 16th century, according to which silence of the group of



present people during the marriage ceremony, displayed a tolerance as lenience for the choice of another. According to this tradition, the presenter of the marriage ceremony asks all present people if they have anything against this marriage. This procedure was described in “The Book of Common Prayer”, which was first concluded in 1549, the same text is contained in the modern version of this book (The Book of Common Prayer, 1549; The (Online) Book of Common Prayer).

In the example above, the silence from the side of the requester acts as the proof for the possibility of marriage (argument from silence). The requester receives information from the present people in the form of silence about consent with the bride and groom's choice. From the side of the guests of the ceremony, that is, those who perform the act of silence it acts as an argument to silence. In this situation, the reasoning of the person who asks can be represented schematically in the form of *modus ponens*: “If the respondents are silent in response to my (the one who asks) question, then, they agree with the choice of the bride and groom (do not have anything against this marriage). Those people who are present at the ceremony in response to my question are silent. Therefore, they agree with the choice of the bride and groom (do not have anything against this marriage)”. For the questioner's side, silence is a reasonable basis for drawing a conclusion about the possibility of marriage. On the part of each of the guests of the ceremony, the reasoning looks like this: “According to established tradition, if those who present at the marriage ceremony agree (do not have anything against this marriage) with the choice of the couple, then they are silent in response to a question from the requesting party (priest). I, as a guest present at the marriage ceremony, agree with the choice of the couple. Therefore, I am silent in response to the question of the questioner's side”.

In the Muslim marriage tradition, according to the context in which people present in the wedding should respond, silence can be interpreted as a negative answer (i.e., it is a metalinguistic function of silence). The point is that during the reading of the *nikah*, witnesses and parents of the bride and groom must be present, to attest to their agreement to the marriage, because without this agreement the marriage can be considered to be invalid. One should remember that *nikah* reading traditions differ





from one region to another, but many sources say that the bride and groom and other people present at the wedding should be asked if they understand what is happening and whether they give consent to the marriage. On this basis, it can be assumed that the silence of any of those being asked may be regarded as a negative answer (negative non-speaking). We are talking about the argument to silence. In this context, for the requester, the silence acts as proof of the impossibility of marriage (argument from silence). The requester receives information from the people present at the wedding in the form of silence about their disagreement with this marriage. This applies to both religious and civil marriages since in many Muslim countries, there are no separate state bodies that register marriage and therefore certificate that a mosque gives (as an institution) is recognized by the state. Therefore, these examples demonstrate that silence in considered marriage procedures, while performing its argumentative function, can at the same time perform informative, volitional and metalinguistic functions.

The matchmaking situation in some regions of Ukraine can serve as an example of silence as a way of arguing one's point of view and at the same time silence as a shaping element in our understanding of another's point of view. In particular, it will be about the premarital part of the wedding composition of some districts of the Middle Polissia in the middle of the XIX-XX centuries. The silence here was a landmark displaying of disagreement on the marriage of the girl they were courted. Based on his own ethnographic field records, archival sources and scientific literature data, Iryna Nessen states: "... In the southern part of the investigated region (Middle Polissia – authors) in the sign of consent to marriage, the girl removed the cork from the bottle with her teeth, which was brought by the matchmakers (Radomyshl, Chernyakhiv districts). Most often the refusal for the matchmakers was to return their bread or silence of the bride while addressing her". (Nessen, 2008: 293)

In such a context, silence from the side of the young woman who was the object of matchmaking when addressing her was a way of showing disagreement on marriage (argument to silence), and on from the matchmakers' side – proof of her disagreement (argument from silence). The reasoning of the young woman can be represented in the form of



modus ponens: “If I do not agree to this marriage, then, I will be silent (based on tradition). I do not agree to this marriage, so I will be silent”. Answering the matchmakers, the girl appeals to her silence. The reasoning of the matchmakers may look like this: “If a girl is silent, then, she does not give consent to marriage. In this particular case, the girl is silent. Therefore, she does not agree to this marriage”.

Another example of the ambivalence of silence as an argument is the example of the rite of matchmaking in the villages of the Lviv region in the second half of the twentieth – early twenty-first centuries. Studying these rites, Lesya Kostyuk states: “In the Pobuzhany village (Busk district, Lviv region) it was customary for the bride during the marriage process to remain silent or to change clothes several times in the evening” (Kostyuk, 2016: 105). This context indicates that in such a case, the silence of the girl who was being the object of the matchmaking can be regarded as an argument for accepting the very ceremony of matchmaking. The bride’s reasoning may look like this: “Based on the existing tradition, if the girl who is being the object of the matchmaking accepts the ceremony of matchmaking, therefore, she is silent or changes clothes several times during the evening. I will be silent as I accept the rite of matchmaking”.

As an example of the dual role of silence, when performing an argumentative function, one can cite the situation of matchmaking of Crimean Tatars – a structural part of the pre-wedding stage of marriage ritual in antiquity. During the matchmaking, if the groom met the parents' requirements, they gave their consent and blessing. However, the last word remained with the girl, whose permission was asked. The girl expressed her permission to marry by silence. Silence in this case from the girl’s side acted as a way of expressing permission and consent at the same time, and from the side of the matchmakers – proof of her consent to the marriage.

### Discussions

Usually, silence as a part of an argument is considered by scientists in the context of the analysis of the features of the argument from silence, its informal structure, and strength, the difficulties of its use. An analysis



of the works of John Lange, Douglas Walton, Mike Duncan, Timothy McGrew, which consider the argument of silence, gives grounds to claim that they investigated named argument in the following perspectives: firstly, what distinguishes the argument from silence from other arguments; secondly, “how the rhetorical relationship between arguer, audience, and context affects use and reception of the argument from silence” (Duncan, 2012: 86); thirdly, “proposing an interpretative and explanatory structure for the so-called *argumentum ex silentio*, or argument from silence” (Duncan, 2012); fourthly, a key problem besetting many uses of the argument is illustrated through the examples; fifthly, “suggesting a standard that must be met in order for any argument from silence to have more than a very weak influence on historical reasoning” (McGrew, 2014).

John Lange exploring the argument from silence notes its value as a historical argument. Taking into account the specificity of the historical methodology and historical arguments, Lange suggests evaluating the “specific instances” of the argument from silence individually in every specific case, as the argument from silence is rarely rationally, and never logically, conclusive (see Lange, 1966: 290-301).

Considering the *ex silentio* argument as a variant of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, that is, as a type of negative argumentation in historical research, Douglas Walton gives examples of the application of such an argument in the analysis of historical events. On the example of negative evidence in scientific research, which is considered to be less impressive than positive evidence, Douglas Walton supposes that *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (we assume that argument from silence too) can be considered “as not being based on ignorance but rather, as being based on knowledge” (Walton, 1999: 372-373).

Analyzing questions about the absence of evidence in historical research, Timothy McGrew draws attention to the weakness of the arguments from silence. “In history, the question has to do with the weight of the argument from silence, particularly when a writer fails to mention a putative event or fact that should have been known to him. Such arguments from silence are, as a rule, quite weak; there are many examples where reasoning from silence would lead us astray” (McGrew, 2011: 65).



Timothy McGrew emphasizes that the arguments from silence are widely used in historical work, but they are also widely contested (McGrew, 2014).

Mike Duncan distinguishes qualities that make an argument from silence different from other arguments and complicate attempts to interpret its value and function. He emphasizes that “interpretation of the strength or weakness of an AFS should proceed case-by-case, taking the acceptability issue of the relationship between the rhetor’s apparent expertise and the audience’s receptiveness into special account” (Duncan, 2012: 95-96).

Thus, scientists from various angles considered silence as a part of an argument (argument from silence). However, these works did not investigate the ambivalence of silence as an argument. This article did not aim to clarify the difficulties associated with the analysis and application of the argument from silence (*argumentum ex silentio*). The consideration of the positions of various scholars regarding this argument was aimed at showing the direction of existing research related to the analysis of the argument, which component is silence, i.e. argument from silence (*argumentum ex silentio*). Also, at the same time, focus on the fact that the act of silence can be considered as an argument in the reasonings of social groups. In this article, we propose to distinguish argument to silence and argument from silence when analyzing the phenomenon of silence in argumentative practices. Such a distinction is made on the basis of the role that silence plays for various participants in the argumentative process, which determines how they build their reasoning. For some participants in the argumentation, silence is a way to show their position on a specific issue in a particular situation. For others (recipients) – the silence of those who use it is the basis for obtaining a conclusion (knowledge) about the position of the interlocutor (interlocutors) regarding a specific situation. This may be the basis for determining the role of silence in the process of the implementation of its argumentative function. Demonstrating this with examples of wedding rituals of different traditions showed that the acceptability of the silence as an argument depends on the tradition of the marriage ceremony and the role silence plays for each side of the ritual.



## Conclusion

Given that the approach of social epistemology is relevant to understanding the epistemological, moral and psychological features of any field of human interactions, where consent and disagreement are present, and basing on the ambivalence of silence as an argument, the specificity of its use on the examples of wedding rituals in different traditions is demonstrated, that made it possible to define its role in the argumentative schemes of reasoning and the strategy of action of groups as social units.

Social epistemology is represented as a modern trend, the main focus of which is to reconsider epistemological problems in the direction of a practical turn. Such a perspective made it possible to increase research interest in the comprehension of group knowledge and beliefs, analyze the argumentative practices of social groups that are the focus of the presented investigation.

In analyzing the phenomenon of silence in argumentative practices, it is suggested to distinguish between argument to silence, when silence is used as a way to argue one's own point of view, and argument from silence, when in the process of argumentation (or in its analysis) silence acts as a way of forming our understanding of another's (opponent) point of view. This may serve as a basis for determining the role of silence in the process of its implementation of the argumentative function and may be the basis for the answer to the question of the acceptability of the mentioned argument.

The demonstration of the mentioned above on the examples of wedding rituals in the various traditions shows that based on the ambivalence of silence as an argument, it is possible to establish the role it plays for each side of the ritual. Of course, the formation of the role of silence as an argument is influenced by the socio-cultural situation that arises in the process of interaction between different social groups. Thus, in the process of implementation of the argumentative function, silence in the wedding ceremonies of the Christian tradition can prove the possibility of marriage (from the requester's side), and be the proof of consent to the choice of bride and groom, acting as a manifestation of tolerance as lenience and condescension to the other's choice (it is about the silence of



the group of people present during the marriage ceremony). In this tradition, from the requester's side, receiving information from people that are present on the ceremony in the form of silence about consenting to the choice of bride and groom, is an argument from silence; from the side of the guests of the ceremony, that is, those who perform the act of silence is an argument to silence. In the Muslim tradition, the silence of a group of people that are present during a marriage ceremony can be interpreted as a negative response, given the context in which the attendees understand that there is a need for an answer. In such a context, the silence of anyone who is asked can be regarded as a negative answer (argument to silence), from the requester's side, it proves the impossibility of marriage since information is provided by those who are present on the ceremony in the form of silence about disagreeing with this marriage (argument from silence). In some regions of Ukraine, during the premarital part of the wedding composition, the silence from the girl's side whom they were matchmaking when addressing her, acted as a means of disagreeing with the marriage (argument to silence), and from the side of the matchmakers — proof of her disagreement (argument from silence), however in some cases, the silence of the girl who was being the object of the matchmaking was considered by the matchmakers, based on the established tradition of matchmaking, as an argument of accepting the matchmaking rite itself. In ancient times, silence from the girl's side during matchmaking in the Crimean Tatars' tradition acted as a way of expressing permission and consent at the same time, and from the side of the matchmakers — proof of her consent to the marriage. Therefore, the acceptability of the argument of silence depends on the tradition of the marriage ceremony and the role it plays for each side of the ritual.

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**Öz:** Tartışma yazarların sosyal antropoloji, sosyal bilgi kuramı, disiplinler arası bağlantıları dayalı, ve teori arařtırmacılar, bireylerin ve sosyal grupların eylemleri mantık ve strateji anlama odaklanmak için hangi etmenlerin birbirleri ile güvenilir ve muhtemel bilgi almak için etkileşimli karmaşık bağlamlar için pratik senaryoları teşvik eden ve açıklayan modern bir eğilim son olarak düşünün. Bir argüman olarak sessizliğin kararsızlığına dayanarak, kullanımının özgüllüğü, çeşitli geleneklerin düğün ritüellerinin örneklerinde gösterilmiştir ve bu da grupların sosyal birimler olarak akıl yürütmesinin tartışmacı planlarındaki rolünü belirlemeyi mümkün kılmıştır. Yazarlar, sessizliğe karşı bir argüman ile sessizlikten bir argüman arasında ayırım yapmayı önerdiler; bu, tartışmacı bir işlevin uygulanması sürecinde sessizliğin rolünü belirlemek için temel teşkil edebilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sessizlik, sosyal gruplar, kolektif epistemoloji, sessizliğe argüman, sessizlikten argüman, düğün.

