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### Epistemology of Silence

**Abstract:** Sometimes a subject would form beliefs based on the silence of a trusted source. This source might be either the subject herself, or another source she finds trustworthy in a certain domain. The main idea of the paper “Epistemology of Silence” written by Sanford Goldberg is that, from an epistemic point of view, both cases have similar significance. But how can a belief based on the silence of a trusted source be epistemically justified? What does it take for the process of silence-based beliefs to be reliable? What are the conditions for doxastic justification of silence-supported beliefs? These and many other interesting questions are answered in “Epistemology of Silence”. In this essay I will try to summarize the answers and to outline the most important ideas in Sanford Goldberg’s paper, and then to point out three ideas that just flashed through my mind while I was reading the paper for the first time. Not all of them are too closely related to the text by Goldberg, which is why I chose to mention all three of them after the main part of my assignment. My essay will consist of eight sections devoted to a brief outline of the main ideas in the paper “Epistemology of Silence”, plus one last section, divided in three subsections, which should present some of my thoughts inspired by Sanford Goldberg’s text.

**Keywords:** Goldberg, Patterson, Goldman, epistemology, silence-based belief, source, knowledge, coverage-reliability, information, truth-likeness, memory preservation, doxastic justification, “strategy of indirection”, Galilei, information transmission, science, publicity

#### 1. What is this all about?

When I was beginning to read “Epistemology of Silence”, I was very intrigued by the title and I instantly started trying to analyze it. My first thought was to ask myself the following: What exactly does it mean to say that I believe I have not heard of, let us say, the news that x? Does it mean that I believe I have not heard of x, or does it mean that I believe no one has been saying anything about x?

Another thing I wanted to know was, what exactly is it that I believe in when I believe I have not heard about x? Do I believe that I have failed to pick up some information about x that was available to me at some point (for example, things which the people around me have been saying but to which, for some reason, I have not been paying any attention at all; or articles written in a newspaper that I bought but did not read through) or do I believe that really was not exposed to any information about x whatsoever? I immediately thought to myself that there is a significant difference between the two cases.

There are also some similarities, too. For example, in both cases there is not “relevant confirming memory” (like Goldberg calls it) of the fact that x, and in both cases there is an assumption that if x was true, I would have been informed about it. This is where I would have stopped with the similarities, but Goldberg, of course, has thought of other two – that in both cases the believed proposition is a negation, and that in both cases “the corresponding affirmative proposition is one regarding whose truth you might well have assigned (or have been disposed to assign) some low probability prior to reflecting on whether you had seen or heard about such a thing”. However, the most important characteristics about different cases of silence-supported beliefs are not these, but the ways how they can be doxastically justified. This is a very important topic in Goldberg’s paper.

#### 2. The main question in epistemology of silence

The main question in epistemology of silence would be under what circumstances is a silence-supported belief doxastically justified. In “Epistemology of Silence” Sanford Goldberg states that, no matter what justification theory we count on, acquiring a silence-based belief that  $\sim p$  is a case of “inference from ignorance” due to the fact that the key premise in the inference, from which the subject has drawn the conclusion  $\sim p$ , is of the type “if no source has presented-as-true  $p$ , then  $\sim p$ ”.

Of course, a line should be drawn between the silence of a source and a subject’s belief in the silence of the source. These are two vastly different things. There may be a case in which the subject is certain that her source is silent, while in fact she has just failed to pick up the information provided by it.

Goldberg’s paper deals with two kinds of silence – that of one’s source and that of one’s own lack of “relevant memories”. He mentions about two factors, where there are possibilities for mistakes in beliefs supported by those types of silence – “coverage-reliability of oneself as a source” and “preservation reliability of one’s memory”. The former is related to memory cases where we have reliance on a source, and the latter is related to

### **3. The role of time in a source’s coverage-reliability**

In any case, time matters. It is of great importance whether or not the subject receives news that confirm  $p$  from her source exactly around the time when she needs to know if  $p$  or  $\sim p$ . Clearly the delayed information about  $p$  (even if it is relevant, comes from a reliable source and is very likely to be true), which does not come before that specific moment  $t$  after which the subject’s knowledge of  $p$  is no longer crucial to her practical or theoretical goals related to her interest in  $p$ , would not be very useful to the subject.

Goldberg explains that if we have to define a source’s coverage-reliability with regards to time, we would have to “restrict  $t$  to the latest time at which possession of the knowledge in question by the subject would satisfy the relevant practical and theoretical aims bound up with her interest in  $\langle p \rangle$ ”. A source who is coverage reliable in this sense will be such that most or all of the propositions  $\pi$  in some domain of interest to the subject, were  $\pi$  true the source would know this, and she would present this knowledge “on time” to help the subject with in whatever aims were bound up with the subject’s interests in the matter”. Obviously if this condition is met, if the source is coverage-reliable according to it, then this source’s silence about  $p$  can be a very good reason to assume that  $\sim p$ , and that assumption will be one of high truth-likeness. However, if the source is not coverage-reliable to begin with, then its lack of notice that  $p$  may actually mean that the source just failed to obtain the information that  $p$ , and we should not think of her silence on  $p$  as a sign that  $\sim p$ .

### **4. Memory preservation and the truth-likeness of a subject’s silence-based belief**

Goldberg starts this section by presenting a conditional, according to which a subject that earlier in the process has obtained the belief that  $p$  and for some time has not received any information whether  $p$ , would just have the “memory impression” that  $p$ .

He then goes on to mention “straight forgetfulness” and “failures of content preservation” as two possible ways in which one’s memory may fail at maintaining the previously acquired belief that  $p$ . In the case of the so-called “straight forgetfulness” the memory just does not save the information that  $p$ , and in the case of “failures of content preservation” the memory has, for some reason, saved content distinct from  $p$ , even though the subject had earlier been informed that  $p$ . In both cases the subject is at an increased risk of having a false silence-based belief.

### **5. Coverage-reliability in the interpersonal case**

Goldberg claims that the same principles go for both when a subject is relying on her own memory and when she is relying on a source different than herself. In the interpersonal case, the subject forms a silence-based belief that  $\sim p$  if her relied-upon sources do not state that  $p$ .

But what if the conditional is false? What if under those specific circumstances that the subject finds herself situated in it is not true that “If it were the case that  $p$ , one of the sources on whom  $S$  relies would have found out that  $p$ ”? Then the sources’ silence may mean nothing more than that they

have failed to discover or announce the fact that  $p$ , and if the subject has formed the belief that  $\sim p$  because the sources do not say that  $p$ , then she will be holding a false silence-based belief.

Another problem we may have is when the process of information transmission is not reliable and the source fails to transmit a message to the subject, or the subject fails to pick up the message. A source may be very reliable when it comes to discovering facts, but completely unreliable when it comes to transmitting them. They may fail just fail to report them. Thus a subject may turn out to be wrong when she is forming and harboring silence-supported beliefs that  $\sim p$  just because she has not received (or does not recall having received) news that  $p$  from her sources. And, of course, we should not disregard the possibility that in some cases the subject may have just forgotten that she has actually received this information; or that she may have just failed to notice or pick up the “message”.

### **6. Conditions of doxastic justification of silence-based beliefs**

According to the reliabilist theory, the justification of such silence-supported beliefs is going to demand that the believer’s means of arriving at their belief is globally reliable. So now we have to answer the question under what circumstances one’s “method” can count as globally reliable in the formation of a belief such as “If no source has presented-as-true  $p$ , then  $\sim p$ ”. Goldberg lists the following conditions as sufficient for this: a) the subject’s expectations are “well calibrated to the sorts of new reports prevalent in her community”, b) the subject believes that “If no source has presented-as-true  $p$ , then  $\sim p$ ”, c) the subject (S) is “sensitive to the likelihood that S herself would come across any relevant report were one to be made”.

### **7. “Socially extended memory”**

Like Goldberg states, there is a difference between believing  $\sim p$  because one does not recall having observed  $p$ , and believing  $\sim p$  because one does not recall having heard  $p$  from someone else. He calls the epistemology of silence-supported beliefs are formed under the influence of our reliance on others epistemology of “socially extended memory”. He claims that social peers act like some sort of a “perceptual and memory system”, always gathering, storing and transmitting information (which can be obtained and used by the subject at any time later), and that the account we have of a certain individual’s cognitive state would not be complete unless we include in it the cognitive states of his or her social peers.

Of course, Goldberg does admit that “cases in which the subject’s peers play these roles are importantly different, and in many ways, from cases in which only her own perceptual and memory systems are in play”, but he still claims that the social peers’ role should be regarded as crucial for a more precise account of the subject’s beliefs – almost as crucial as that of the individual’s own memory system. (This conception shows a completely reliabilist approach to the matter.) Naturally, the less coverage-reliable the peers, the less reliable the silence-supported beliefs of the subject will be, because, like stated on page 22, “the lack of coverage-reliability of your sources in the relevant domain translates into a lack of reliability in the belief you form through reliance on these sources for coverage”.

Later on, on another page of the paper Goldberg writes some more about “extended social memory”, explaining that he sees it as the “social version” of the “extended memory” theory. He clarifies that while the extended memory theory claims that data repositories like notebooks or diaries play the part of “personal mental prosthetics”, the “extended social memory” idea is that this part can be (and in fact is) played also by the people around us.

Of course, there are huge distinctions between the way a data repository such as the diary functions and the way the human mind functions. A notebook can serve as an information repository, but a human being cannot. A human being can only act like, or play the part of, an information bearer. We can choose what to write down in a notebook, but we cannot choose for another person exactly what are they going to remember when we share information with them in a conversation (or if they will remember it at all, for that matter!).

Another difficulty which would typically arise if we count on others as “information repositories” is that, since there is no way to gain access into someone else’s mind, we may not always have

(sufficient) access to the information that they are keeping, and this definitely presents a serious obstacle to forming beliefs based on said information. Thus it is not the case that relying on the silence of an “information repository” peer is a reliable method of forming a true silence-supported belief, because unless a person shares what she has in her mind, it will always remain completely inaccessible to us.

However, this does change the fact that social contacts and arrangements contribute to the formation of true silence-supported beliefs. Social conditions are, as a matter of fact, the “background conditions of silence-supported beliefs”.

### **8. Main threats of unreliability in silence-supported beliefs**

According to Goldberg, the main threats of unreliability in silence-supported beliefs are 1) in the coverage, and 2) in the unreliability in the transmission process through which we receive information from the sources. He says that in case 1) the reason is the failure of the belief to comply with the truth-to-presentation conditional, and in case 2) – the failure to comply with the transmission conditionals. He then adds that case number 2) tends to get complicated when we rely on a source other than ourselves, because then we would also have to be confident that we have not received any such reports before. Goldberg writes that, otherwise, since self-trust is also a form of trust, cases in which we rely on others are, overall, similar to cases in which we rely on ourselves, they just have “additional features”.

### **9. Some ideas**

When I was reading “Epistemology of Silence” for the first time, the following three ideas occurred to me. Initially I did not give them much thought, but as time progressed, I gained a deeper interest on the topic, and since my ideas were inspired by Goldberg, I decided to make an attempt to draw them out, give them shape and check whether they really have something to do with Goldberg’s ideas. So here they are, included in the essay:

- A) Epistemology of silence and the strategy of indirection.
- B) Epistemology of silence and the question about the distinction between the original source of a particular piece of information and an information transmitter which is not the original source.
- C) Epistemology of Silence and the publicity of/in science.

A) Epistemology of silence and the strategy of indirection.

Recently I had to read an article by author Stephen Clucas (“Galileo, Bruno and the Rhetoric of Dialogue in Seventeenth-century Natural Philosophy”), which in turn led me to reading the introduction to Annabel Patterson’s book “Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of writing and Reading in Early Modern England”, in which “strategies for evading censorship” are mentioned. The strategy of indirection is, very roughly described, a tactic of avoiding censorship by carefully “disguising” one’s written works in such a way that they would seemingly comply with all censorship rules and requirements while at the same time they would still bear a possibly unacceptable, inadmissible or overly audacious message to the readers. This is usually achieved by adopting certain approaches or styles of writing which allow the author to appear either in agreement with the commonly accepted views about some matter, or just neutral (and thus officially silent) on said matter.

Of course, there are many ways for an author to express herself. More than one technique exists to make a point. A direct statement is only one of them, and actually it is not even the most preferred. During various times in history the roundabout way has been chosen far more often than the straightforward one when an author had an overly innovative approach, scandalous ideas or “unacceptable” theories, but did still wish to express them without having them censored or getting punished for publishing them. An example that immediately comes to my mind is the Galileo affair.

Sixteen years after having been warned by the Inquisition not to teach or defend the Copernican theory, which at the time was considered to be going against the Bible and the Christian doctrine, Galileo Galilei published a famous written work called “Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo” (or “Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems”), the characters of which were discussing and comparing the Ptolemaic and the Copernican systems. Needless to say, the reaction of the Church was negative, even though the “Dialogue” did not have an outrageous tone or shockingly innovative ideas. As a result, Galileo was accused of formal heresy.

Deeply hurt and offended, and also threatened, Galileo Galilei wanted to prove his innocence and to avoid punishment. In order to defend himself from the unjust accusations that had been made against him, he referred to St. Augustine of Hippo’s exegetical principles. According to one of the main principles – the so-called Principle of Limitation (PL) – the Bible’s mission is to show us how to save our souls, and not to teach us about the structure of the world or something like that. Thus it has no scientific value as it does not contain any sort of theories.

Even though it may have an undisputed authority over everything that has to do with moral values, righteousness and virtues, when it comes to astronomy and other natural sciences, the Holy Book, in fact, says nothing. Save for a few passages like the one which tells about the motion of the sun across the sky during sunrise and sunset (see Ecclesiastes), and which should not be taken literally, the Bible is silent with regards to facts about the natural world. Galileo was aware of that and emphasized on it when he was arguing that the Copernican theory did not contradict the Bible. Thus it appears that in order to make people take his claims under consideration, Galileo was relying on the silence of a widely regarded, very respectable source, or at least on its indirection.

However, this is not what I mean by “strategy of indirection”. Like I stated earlier, the strategy of indirection is related to the different tactics used by writers who wish to avoid censorship. In my opinion, this is exactly what Galileo Galilei did, when he chose to write a dialogue with which to express his ideas. While writing the dialogue, Galileo was careful to give both sides of the dispute – the supporter of the Copernican system and the supporter of the Ptolemaic system – good enough arguments, so as not to show preference for any of the two theories. Allowing the fictional characters engage in a discussion, he carefully incorporated his own comprehensions in the dialogue between them, instead of just stating what he believed in directly. This is, in my opinion, a tactic that was intended to let him remain officially “silent” on the topic discussed by the dialogue characters. It was supposed to leave Galileo the option to lean on a good excuse – the excuse that he was just trying to recreate a dispute between people who support two rival theories; the excuse that he did not make any claims, or, in other words – the excuse of silence. Unfortunately this excuse did not help Galileo.

B) Epistemology of silence and the question about the distinction between the original source of a particular piece of information and an information transmitter which is not the original source.

Whether the relied upon source is the subject herself or someone/something else, it is clear that there are two aspects, two parallel sides of this reliance: 1) the reliance upon someone/something as a source of information, and 2) the reliance upon someone/something as a transmitter of information.

I understand 2) as reliance upon both the process of content preservation and the process of content transmission, although a difference can be made between those two processes, as there could be many cases in which they do not coincide nor overlap. Let us take the following case for example. I would say that the local postman may be a very reliable transmitter of information, because: a) he provides the entire neighborhood with mail, newspapers and magazines every single day; b) he has never missed a single day of work; c) he is always on time; d) he never makes any mistakes (i.e. he always delivers the right kind of material to the right mailboxes; never loses any mail; never forgets to make a deliverance, etc.)

So he is a reliable information transmitter. Surely people could count on him to supply the necessary information on time. It seems right to think that if I have not received mail today, it would be because I was not sent any, and not because the postman has accidentally delivered my mail to another person, or because he has lost it somewhere along the way, for example. But does this also make him a reliable information preserver?

To be able to say if he is a reliable information preserver or not, first I will have to answer the following question – what does it mean to be a reliable information preserver? It seems easiest to say that information preserving means saving and/or memorizing a certain amount of information for a certain period of time. But if this is correct, then we cannot say that the postman is an information preserver, since what he does is to simply transfer information that he supposedly has no knowledge about. It is most certainly not his job to retain memory of what he is delivering. In fact, he is not even supposed to know what he delivers. In other words, it is both unlikely and unnecessary for him to be an information preserver (and, of course, it is also undesirable – would you be happy if you knew your local postman knows by heart the content of every letter you have received in the last ten years?). I see this as an example of a case in which the process of information transmission is separate from the process of information preservation.

In this case information transmission would be consisting only of the act of deliverance of information, and nothing more. Information preservation, on the other hand, would have two moments – 1) preservation of information in the original source (this could be, for example, the memory of a person who witnessed some event, or even an information repository such as a notebook or a diary, if we take those to be some kind of personal mental prosthetics) and 2) preservation of information in the receiving end of the supposed chain of information transmission.

I realize it could be argued that in information preservation there may also be an intermediate moment of content preservation – in the transmitter of information. Perhaps this would apply to the case with the postman, or to similar cases in which a neutral transmitter (and by this I mean one that is not familiar with the content that one transmits, as is the case with the postman) transfers a certain content from a source (which was presumably preserving the content) to a recipient (that would presumably preserve the received content). However, I would prefer to call that a moment of temporarily reserving the information until it has been delivered, and not preserving it (which I take to: (1) be something permanent, and not just temporary, (2) involve being familiar with the content).

According to my understanding, the process of information preservation does not always involve, nor is it always involved in, information transmission. However, when it is, it is often dependent on the sources, the transmitters and the recipients.

I make a distinction between three types of roles that can possibly take part of an information transmission chain – a source, a transmitter (could be more than one transmitter) and a recipient. In the “chain” of information transmission all elements play an important role. Should this role be a fixed one – like in the case of the local postman – i.e. should it involve fixed rules and obligations by which it must be performed, then the element which plays it becomes a symbol of reliability to us. We start to associate it with trustworthiness and stability. We regard the information it brings us without doubt, and we regard its silence as a sign that it has no news for us, and not that it has failed to bring us news.

But what exactly is it that we rely upon, when we rely upon a trusted source or transmitter of information? Is it the same every time, for every “link” or “element” of the information transmission chain? In my opinion – no, it is not. I am more inclined to think that it is different for every part.

With sources of information, for example, what we rely upon is actually a combination of the following: 1) coverage, 2) accuracy of the information, 3) relevance of the information, and last but not least – 4) timeliness.

With transmitters of information it is also a combination of different things: 1) timeliness or receiving the necessary information, 2) order, routine or some type of schedule followed strictly by the transmitters which makes them reliable in transmitting (or we can just call that a timeliness also, but another type of timeliness – timeliness of delivering the information), and finally 3) responsibility.

So far I have mentioned nothing about the recipient's role in those processes. Perhaps it is time to outline the most important recipient factors that characterize a successful information transmission and/or preservation. I think we may say that there has been a successful transmission of information if the following conditions are met: the recipient has received the information and 2) the recipient has obtained a clear and correct understanding about the piece of information s/he has received.

As for successful preservation, it should probably consist of the following: 1) the recipient has received the information, 2) the recipient has obtained a clear and correct understanding about the piece of information s/he has received, and 3) the recipient has, in one way or another, saved the received piece of information. In other words, a successful preservation of information in the recipient consists of almost the exact same characteristics as the successful information transmission, the only difference being that information preservation has one more characteristic added.

If those or similar conditions are met, the recipient can be sure that his/her expectations to stay informed about all updates in a relevant domain will be met. It is in this way that the silence of the trusted source can itself become burdened with meaning and thus epistemically significant.

I am wondering whether it would be correct to say that the term "silence" has not been specified with enough details. To me, for example, it is not entirely clear what it means when we say we are talking about epistemic "silence". Does it mean that the source does not transmit information? Does it mean that the recipient did not succeed in obtaining and/or understanding the information?

Of course, Goldberg makes a very sharp distinction between these cases. But I am thinking something. Would it not be best if we went even further and named each case differently? In this way we would be able to say, for example, that a subject who has failed to obtain the information that p that was available to her, and thus has formed a belief that  $\sim p$ , has unacquaintance-based belief, and not a silence-supported belief.

Clearly, due to various reasons a source or transmitter of information may choose to withhold said information from the recipient. It may also be inaccurate and/or unreliable when it comes to the process of transmission. It may also have obtained its information in an unreliable manner (i.e. wishful thinking).

#### C) Epistemology of Silence and the publicity of/in science.

It is assumed by many people that science is a "public" or "social" activity – and I mean this in more than one way. Let me start with the most obvious thing – it is widely believed that information about scientific methods and goals is (or should be) publicly accessible for observation and check-up. This generates two problems. One of them I will refer to as the problem about publicity of science, the other I will call the problem about the publicity in science.

First of all, I will start with the problem about the publicity of science. Some of us have unrealistic expectations and concepts regarding the true nature of scientific work and the scientific communities; not to mention that very few people outside said scientific communities actually are sufficiently well-informed about the actual state of science and about the latest progress. In the age of media and technology we tend to think that if we have not heard about a new discovery and, for example, about the latest results from a certain experiment, then the discovery has not been made yet, and the experiment has probably just not been carried out.

We have little knowledge of what actually goes on in the realm of science, yet we think we are informed, because every day we are bombarded by pseudo-scientific facts while surfing on the internet or reading the newspapers. This happens very often on the so-called "health pages" or "health news", for example. Originally intended to be informative and useful, most of the articles that are available to us are in reality very often self-contradictory, dubious or just plain misleading – except for the ones

that have appeared in medical books and journals, of course, but they are inaccessible to most people who are not educated doctors and are thus what I would call “silent” sources to them.

Most of us rely on television and the press to inform us about the latest important revelations of science, medicine, etc. But are we really right to expect that television channels and newspapers are going to keep up with the never-ending achievements of contemporary science? And are we right to expect that they will report about those achievements timely and present them in an adequate manner – i.e. without twisting the truth (accidentally or not), missing important information, confusing facts, etc.? What is more, are we right to expect that scientists will announce every work they undertake and every result they get to the public or to their fellow researchers? What does “public”, “announced” or “reported” mean in the sphere of science? And how “public” exactly is a scientist’s work? Maybe some of us have a completely wrong idea about how things happen in the world of science and are viewing it through the prism of the media (which sometimes oversimplifies, twists, changes, or in other way misrepresents information)?

Personally I admit that I do not have even the slightest idea about the ways of the scientific community. This is why I looked up what I could find about the connection between science and publicity and I got Alvin I. Goldman’s book “Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public” in the hope that I could learn something useful about the matter. And this is how I was introduced to problem number two – the problem about the publicity in science.

The fifth chapter of Goldman’s book is devoted to “Science, Publicity and Consciousness”. It deals with the incompatibility between the requirement for intersubjective methods and the study of consciousness.

In the introduction Goldman mentions about a conflict or tension between scientific practice and the publicity requirement. He writes the following: “a traditional view is that scientific evidence can be produced only by intersubjective methods that can be used by different investigators and will produce agreement. This intersubjectivity, or publicity, constraint ostensibly excludes introspection. But contemporary cognitive scientists regularly rely on their subject’s introspective reports in many areas, especially in the study of consciousness.”

In science there is a publicity requirement for methods which consists in the condition that every method must be such that no matter which investigators use it, they should be able to always arrive at the same results (“and form the same beliefs”, as stated by Alvin Goldman himself). Only then can the method be regarded as an intersubjective (or public) method. However, Goldman makes a remark that this definition would not work properly in the case of introspection: “Since I cannot introspect your conscious states and you cannot introspect mine, I do not apply introspection to any questions about your states of consciousness and you do not apply introspection to any questions about mine. Introspection is always applied by just one person per question, and never leads two investigators to arrive at different answers to the same question. Hence, introspection vacuously satisfies Definition I, thereby qualifying as a public method. Clearly, this is contrary to virtually everyone’s intention.”

This leads us to a more interesting problem, in my opinion, and I will call it the problem about the “silent” consciousness. According to Goldman, without the aid of the introspective reports mentioned in the quote from the above paragraph, cognitive science is unable to tell with certainty when conscious states are present.

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