Tracking the Transformation from Benign Silence to Harmful Silencing

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The relationship between silence itself and silencing as a harmful speech act has not been fully laid out, either in feminist scholarship or in silence scholarship. Accounts of the harm of silencing tend to rely on a tacit understanding of what silence and silencing are, and this tacit understanding is not strongly connected with philosophical accounts of the phenomenon of silence itself. The connection between silence and silencing is usually not one of bare measurable audible output; instead, since silencing frequently involves a practice whereby articulated utterances are discounted, the silence must be a structural silence related to the silences that structure narratives and arguments. Structural silence itself is not harmful; thus, the harm in silencing must be connected to our tendency to take our narrative constructions of real events as perfect representations of reality itself.

Competing narrative accounts of the same event frequently rely on mutually agreed-upon elements: participants, events, sequence, result. Disagreement arises regarding relative importance, meaning, and causality. In some cases, an account is simply inaccurate or wrong, but those cases I set aside. In more difficult cases, the problem is that each account represents a genuine attempt to offer a responsible, just depiction and analysis of the situation and yet each sides' arguments rely upon the necessary falsity of the argument on the other side. I shall argue that the problem stems from an implicit overreliance on narrative understanding. Each side offers compelling evidence for their claims, and that evidence is arranged to form a roughly narrative understanding of the world in general and of the given situation in particular. Narrative cohesiveness depends upon the logical arrangement of causes and events to present a particular

experience or viewpoint; material that does not support that experience must, for the sake of coherence, be rejected. Thus, every narrative depends upon the silencing of material identified as extraneous to the particular account presented.

I will show how this benign structural silence, present in every narrative, can become a harmful instance of silenc*ing*. This, in turn, reveals a tension in all narratives, such that even verifiably true narratives may yet commit harms by suppressing details that are in fact irrelevant to the telos of the particular narrative. Thus, we have good reason to be a little skeptical of every narrative, and we ought to adopt an attitude of sincere humility when constructing narratives, no matter how true they are. We may not be able to avoid some of the acts of silencing we commit, but we can learn to see our understanding of all true accounts as necessarily limited, fluid, and, at bottom, characterized by a fundamental ineffability.

I start with an overview of the phenomenon of silence itself before describing the structural role silence plays in narrative and in argument. Then I provide an overview of the extant feminist work on the phenomenon of silencing. Last, I explain why the practice of silencing must involve structural narrative silence. This establishes the ground for further study of the connection between silence and silencing and for positive political projects that aim to repair the harms of silencing both by altering and by resisting narrative representations.

Silence is a neutral phenomenon ontologically distinct from and equiprimordial with the realm of utterance (Dauenhauer Silence 5). Silence is neither inherently destructive or harmful, just as utterance is neither inherently destructive nor harmful. There is no such thing as absolute silence, and there is no practice or instance of silence that can be identified as such universally. To the ancient Greeks, refusing food at a host's table signaled silence, but for us, such a refusal would not (Montiglio 48). This can be seen in the realm of utterance as well: one can use words to humorous effect, but what counts as humorous depends upon the audience; moreover, the kinds of utterances that make others laugh differ across cultures and time periods. So too with silence: the literature shows a broad range of events that uphold or break silence and these may have only a secondary connection to a lack of measurable sound.

There are three main classes of silence: quiet silence which has to do with measurable auditory stimulus; narrative silence, which has to do with information that drops out of narrative presentation; and the deep or ineffable silence that grounds experiences that resist discursive articulation. My argument in this paper is restricted to claims about narrative silence. Many of these silences are harmless. For example, the reader never learns the name of Prue Ramsay's groom in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, whether or not the Macbeths had children, or whether or not Sir Gawain was ever able to forgive himself his own human frailty (Cavell 232, Woolf 131). These silences are necessary to the structure of any narrative as such, as they give the story or argument its particular character. The information

about the characters and events in *To The Lighthouse* could have been given quite differently: rather than skipping over the ten years of the war and its aftermath, Woolf could have created a sweeping drama of the family's suffering juxtaposed against the suffering of the war. One might wonder why Woolf focused so heavily on something so apparently trivial as a lighthouse when there was a war going on. My point here is not to criticize Woolf's novel but to make it clear that the same characters, events, and items can be described and explained quite differently in the hands of different authors. In order to present just the artistic creation intended, the author makes the choice to give just these details and not others, and the omitted details are passed over in silence.

Silence in the structure of a narrative is most strongly correlated with the presentation of narrative time. This is noteworthy for (at least) two reasons: (1) Informal invocations of silence rarely refer to time, typically restricting themselves primarily to the realm of logocentric discourse.[1] This means that popular understandings of silence miss one of the defining characteristics of silence, which is its unique temporality (Dauenhauer 5–16, 75–77). (2) The regularity with which narratologists associate time and silence undergirds Bernard Dauenhauer's phenomenological claim that silence has its own temporality, a claim he uses to support his larger argument for the phenomenon-status of silence. Although the experience of time in narration and the experience of time in lived silence may not be identical, they are nevertheless structurally similar, and attention to one gives insight to the other.

The relation between discourse-time and narrative-time give a narrated account its particular character. Narrative time is the amount of time covered by the narration; discourse time is the amount of time it takes to deliver the narrative. In the Woolf example above, ten years—a lengthy narrative time—is delivered to the reader in a mere eighteen pages, whereas the preceding 121 pages cover less than one full day. The longer discourse time covers a shorter narrative time in parts one and three of the novel and the reverse holds in the central section. The decisions made about which details to give, and where, lend the book its unique particularity. In an analytical project, the process is similar: a theory cannot present every true statement. Instead, some true claims must be taken as more significant than other equally true claims because they are more directly relevant to answering the question that guides the inquiry (Haslanger 35). This means that every fictional and non-fictional narrative as well as every theory depends upon the suppression or relinquishment of claims and details that are true. This process, wherein "a good deal of information which would overburden the narrative is simply filtered out, is called *ellipsis*" (Fludernik 33).

I believe that narrative ellipsis is at the bottom of the mutually contradictory narratives and arguments of, for example, many contemporary political conflicts in the US: for the sake of expediency, apparently minor details that would overburden the narrative and prevent it from arriving at its conclusion are filtered

out. One problem is that in real time, we may be ill-equipped to discern which details are minor and which are essential. Another problem is that social and political expediency may not be identical with truth, narrative or otherwise. I move now to discuss the practice of silencing before connecting narrative ellipsis with the structural silences in arguments and then offering some notes toward an account of how structural silence can become harmful silencing.

Silencing refers to an oppressive act whereby a person or group with more power makes it difficult or even impossible for a person or group of persons with less power to articulate central aspects of their lives or experiences (Saul, "Feminist Philosophy of Language"). How one goes about making it impossible for someone else to convey those aspects can vary, but the list would include versions of the following: persons can be silenced through death or the threat of death, torture or the threat of torture; through exile, banishment, or imprisonment; through gaslighting, *ad hominem* attacks, and other forms of discrediting; through marginalization, diversion, and distraction. With the exception of death and some torture, the person silenced is not rendered physically incapable of speech. When we say someone has been silenced, it may be more accurate to say that that person's speech has been emptied of its power to make meaning or effect change.

By the early 1990s, feminist philosophers of language connected J. L. Austin's work on the performative function of utterances to feminist anti-pornography philosophical activism. Pornography had been protected by free speech laws. Thus, even though pornography is not always created using verbalized words, it made sense to investigate whether Austin's work on the active function of some utterances could extend to pornographic discourse. Austin claimed that statements did not simply explain or describe reality; they also play a role in constituting reality. There are three kinds of temporally-bound activity an utterance can perform: The locutionary act comprises the words said, for example, "I confer the degree of doctor of philosophy." The perlocutionary act is the effect that follows from the locutionary act: the reception of the degree and the recognition of its conferral. What Austin and his feminist followers argued was missing in philosophy was sufficient recognition of what happened in the middle to cause the change in status: this he termed the *illocutionary act*. This is the force the words have to cause the confer*ing* of the degree, the marry*ing* of the two persons, the warn*ing* in the shout of "Fire!"—it is the activity that I highlight in the italicization of the "-ing" emphasizing the active force the words represent (Langton 295–96, Austin 103). Somehow, the shouting of the word "Fire" in a room filling with smoke does not merely describe to the persons present what must be happening; it also functions as an active warning urging and persuading those persons to leave the room immediately.

If someone heard the warning "Fire!" and thought it was merely an apt description and nothing further, and so did nothing further, then we would say that the warning failed. The person was not warned by what was meant to have warned.

This is the argument offered by feminist philosophers Rae Langton, Jennifer Hornsby, Mari Mikkola, and others, who took up MacKinnon's work on pornography and civil rights, combined it with Austin's claims about the action-producing force of language, and argued that pornography denies women the perlocutionary power to refuse consent to unwanted sex. Pornographic depictions of sex present women's refusals of consent as exciting foreplay, and this, the authors claim, structures men's reception of actual women's refusals outside of pornography such that "No" is interpreted to mean "keep going" and so the locutionary act (the "No") does not have the perlocutionary effect (the cessation of attempts to engage in sexual acts) because the woman has been illocutionarily silenced.

Calling ineffective speech acts a form of silence is somewhat surprising and it is not obvious that actual silence is involved, at least not at first glance. After all, women who deny or refuse to consent are not literally silent whether by their speech or in their bodies—they often do and say much in their refusals (as is noted in the literature). They might be compared with Cassandra who, because she dared refuse Apollo's advances, was cursed to prophesy truly and never be believed. Cassandra was not silent, and it is not clear that ancient Greek audiences would have seen her as such. She was, however, ineffective—Cassandra's words lacked perlocutionary force, and not because she failed to say the right words or to say them correctly. Rather, she herself, in her person, became seen as one whose words could not be seen as authoritative.[2]

It is tempting to say that the silence in silencing arises because in the case of speech acts that don't do what they are meant to do, it is as though the speech act was never made, and so it is as though the speaker had been genuinely silent. However, if there is to be any silence in silencing, this cannot be the case. First, the speech act *was* made; second, even if it did not have the intended effect for the intended audience, in many cases, there is someone who understands the meaning and intention of the utterance: the audience knows Cassandra's words to be true; the authors of the feminist work on speech acts and silencing understand the refusal of consent that did not work.

If silencing is phenomenally related to silence, then it may be because silencing produces something akin to a structural narrative ellipsis. The act of silencing might be seen as the "filtering out" of data that appears to overburden the narrative or muddy the argument. What one person decides is a trivial detail may be essential from the perspective of the person whose safety or well-being depend upon just that detail, and this can take place in a narrative account of a lived experience as well as in an argument that interprets experiences or data.

Silencing, as a harmful practice that epistemically discredits some speakers because of their membership in a non-privileged group, is not an instance of silence itself. It does, however, appear to be strongly connected with structural narrative silences. As a constitutive element of all narratives *qua* narrative, structural

silences are necessary and frequently helpful. Lived experience, however, is not itself a narrative. Reality as all that is the case does not require for its existence structural silences of any kind. Our understandings of reality are frequently organized in narrative form, and we make sense of the world in story and argument. This means, minimally, that we must be aware that our narrative organizations of lived experience are never equivalent to reality itself. Moreover we are, more frequently than we know, complicit in harmful practices of silencing, particularly to the extent that we make meaning according to unexamined privilege.

I end with the brief statement that narrative is unable to convey the entire truth about the reality in any manifestation. We may not be able to help our creation of narrative accounts of real events; when we take the narratives for reality itself, that is where we go wrong. Far from excusing the moral and ontological blindness that results from unthinking adherence to unexamined narrative representations of reality, my notes toward an account of the shift from silence to silencing should indicate that we are responsible for what must be understood as a refusal to break open our pet stories about reality.

NOTES

1. A note listing all the article, essay, and book titles that include the phrase "breaking silence" would be too long for our purposes; "breaking silence" generally seems to indicate "saying something that has been repressed, denied, or discredited, and saying it with new authority." Recent quests for silence tend to search for areas with minimized human noise or for practices not speaking.
2. I'm relying on the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus for my understanding of Cassandra.

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