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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Filling the Silence: Self-Experience and Communication in Social Anxiety

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Abstract
This paper aims to explore from a philosophical perspective the experience of silence in social anxiety. Moving from the account of lived silences in mood disorders developed by Degerman (2024a), I argue that while "imposed", "depressed", "unknowing", and "peaceful" silences can all be experienced by those who are socially anxious, this condition is also associated with two distinct ways of perceiving silence that are not captured by Degerman's taxonomy. More specifically, drawing also on the exploration of published first-person reports of this condition, I maintain that social anxiety may be accompanied by both a perceived inability to fill certain silences when one wants to do so, and a weakened sense of control over how silences are filled. I then proceed to outline how these dynamics may be rooted in forms of self-experience that are affectively laden and shape one's sense of possibility when interacting with other people.

Keywords Silence · Social Anxiety · Lived Experience · Self-Experience · Affective States

1 Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to emerging research on the philosophy of silence by exploring the nature of this phenomenon in experiences associated with social anxiety disorder (APA, 2022)[1].

[1] Some editions of diagnostic manuals (e.g. World Health Organization, 1992) have used the term "social phobia" to refer to some of the features that are currently captured by the term "social anxiety disorder". In this paper I use the terms interchangeably, and I also employ the acronym "SAD" (social anxiety disorder) as an abbreviation. I draw on these conceptualisations because they capture some core aspects of

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The way in which silence is involved in the phenomenology of mental ill-health remains an under-explored topic; however, an important contribution towards filling this gap has been given recently by Dan Degerman (2024a, b), who has investigated the experience of silence in mood disorders and developed a specific taxonomy of these phenomena.

Degerman's account focuses on the different ways in which persons with mood disorders may experience their own silence (understood as the absence of externalised speech). More specifically, considering factors such as their causes, and how inner speech intertwines with these "outward" silences, Degerman (2024a) offers a classification that includes "imposed", "depressed", "unknowing", and "peaceful" silences.

In this paper I argue that, while the forms of silence identified by Degerman are helpful to understand the phenomenology of social anxiety, they are not sufficient to provide an exhaustive account of how silence is experienced by socially anxious persons. Drawing also on first-person reports of these and other relevant experiences,[2] I maintain that social anxiety may also be accompanied by both a perceived inability to fill certain silences when one wants to do so, and a weakened sense of control over how silences are filled. I then proceed to develop an account of these forms of silence, suggesting that they can be best understood by considering the role that affective self-experience plays in shaping our sense of possibility.

This enables me to expand our understanding of the phenomenology of silence and mental ill-health, both by showing the applicability of Degerman's taxonomy to a different set of disorders from the ones he originally considered, and by proposing new categories to be added to this taxonomy. In doing so, however, the paper also advances an original account of how the experience of silence is structured. More specifically, I suggest that to best understand the features of the phenomenology of silence, we need to look at how affective self-experience and, in particular, feelings of ability and self-worth, are intertwined with it.

The remit of this study lies within philosophical research on the lived experience of mental phenomena and mental health, and is shaped by the approach of philosophical phenomenology (cf. Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). This is an approach that recognises the existence of a plurality of phenomenal or experiential domains,[3] investigating the first-person dimension of perception, action, cognition, and affectivity. Within this framework it is thus possible to talk about "experience" in relation to both sensory and other phenomena, and silence is something that can be experienced (as opposed to, for example, something that can be merely thought about). In virtue of this, the insights developed in this study resonate with other accounts of silence in the philosophy of perception which reject the idea that we can only have a cognitive grasp of

the phenomenology of anxiety in relation to social dynamics. The experiences I am concerned with can have a distressing and/or disruptive character; however, I do not take a position as to whether the notion of disorder is best suited to encapsulate them.

[2] Some aspects of the account I present in this study are also informed by my own experience as a long-term anxiety sufferer.

[3] Within philosophical phenomenology, "phenomenal" and "experiential" can be considered to be synonyms (i.e. what is referred to as "experience" always has a phenomenal character, or, otherwise said, all experience is *lived* experience) (cf. Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012: 7 ff.).

the absence of sounds and rather argue that it is possible to genuinely *hear* silence (cf. Meadows, 2020; Phillips, 2013). However, due to its focus on affective, rather than auditory phenomenology, this work also contributes to expand our understanding of what the experience of silence amounts to.

2 Social Anxiety

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), at the core of social anxiety disorder is a "a marked, or intense, fear or anxiety of social situations in which the individual may be scrutinized by others" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022: 230). Such fear or anxiety may lead sufferers to avoid the relevant social situations, or to endure them with distress, and these dynamics tend to be persistent both over time and across similar circumstances.

In social anxiety, the fear of being negatively evaluated can revolve around different features or behaviours: for example, one may be worried about coming across as "stupid" or "boring", or about certain bodily appearances or processes, such as "blushing" or "sweating" (APA, 2022: 230).

Cognitive-behavioural models of social phobia have highlighted the centrality of negative expectations and self-representation in the structure of this condition (e.g. Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). From this perspective, the feelings of fear or anxiety would be rooted in distorted self-appraisals, biases concerning the evaluative standards of the people one is interacting with, or the likelihood that one will be judged negatively by them. For example, those who suffer from social phobia may make inaccurate assessments of their appearances and performances, and may over-estimate how visible their anxiety is to others, or how likely it is that their audience will be critical of them (cf. Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Wong et al., 2014).

The DSM highlights that some people with this disorder experience social anxiety only in situations in which they need to perform in certain ways, for example when they are required or expected to speak in public (APA, 2022: 230). This draws attention to the fact that there are types of social anxiety that revolve specifically around speech; however, even when the anxiety is not of the "performance only" type, the fear that is experienced may include speaking-related aspects (for example, one may be anxious about stumbling on their words) (230). More broadly, there are connections between the experience of social anxiety and linguistic expression, and in the rest of this study, I will explore these in relation to the notion of "silence". However, in order to do so, I will first introduce the taxonomy of silence developed by Degerman.

3 Degerman's Taxonomy

Aiming to challenge the idea that all forms of silence connected to mental illness are negative and need to be dispelled, Degerman (2024a) has developed an account of lived silences in mood disorders, which can be helpfully applied to understand the experience of silence in mental ill-health more broadly.

First, Degerman distinguishes between "objective silence" and the "lived experience of silence" (2024a: 2786 ff.). While the former indicates the absence of sounds or speech produced by things or people, the latter refers to the subjective or first-personal experience that one may have of their own or other silences. As far as the lived experience of silence is concerned, Degerman further differentiates between "outside silence", "outward silence", and "inner silence" (2786 ff.).

Outside silence designates the subjective or first-personal experience of objective silence, that is "an experience of the silence of other people, beings, objects, or spaces" (Degerman, 2024a: 2787). Outward silence on the other hand indicates the lived experience of what we could call a 'relational' form of silence. More specifically, this is an experience of "the individual's silences toward or among other people, which usually involve not speaking" (2787). Finally, inner silence refers to an internal experience of silence, namely "an individual's silence toward herself, such as the absence of some or all conscious thought" (2787).

Degerman (2024a) further identifies four types of lived experience of silence that may accompany mood disorders: "imposed silence", "depressed silence", "unknowing silence", and "peaceful silence".

Imposed silence occurs "when someone feels they cannot say something they want to because of external factors like stigma and prejudice" (Degerman, 2024a: 2788). These are "involuntary and unpleasant" (2789) silences that do not intend to be communicative (in fact, such silences are the result of a difficulty or impossibility to communicate that is externally induced). Imposed silence is for Degerman a form of outward silence.

Depressed silence involves the experience of a lack of words which has been caused by some change the person has undergone (Degerman, 2024a: 2791). Degerman emphasises that this is different from not being able to find the appropriate words to describe a particular experience. As he explains, "[i]n depressed silence, it is not that the right words cannot be found but that no words can be found: the possibility of speaking has disappeared" (2791-2). This is taken to be a form of inner silence that frequently entails outward silences too. In a more recent article, Degerman further characterises this experience as "empty silence" (2024b), and draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to further conceptualise it.

According to this account, we often experience silences pre-reflectively, namely, we are not explicitly aware of the presence of these silences: we do not pay attention to them, and they remain unnoticed. Following Merleau-Ponty (2012), Degerman suggests that this way of experiencing silence is intimately connected to the manner in which we experience speech. This is the case because the pre-reflectivity of silence is allowed for by the fact that typically we do not struggle to find words to fill the silence, a feature that is captured by Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "near presence of words" (2012: 186). According to Degerman, this can be disrupted in depression, as depressed persons may no longer experience words as seamlessly available to them, "not because they do not have the *right* words but because they do not have *any* words […]" (2024b: 138). As a result, the experiencer can become reflectively aware of these "empty silences", and multiple occurrences of this kind can have a significant impact on the individual's confidence and ability to speak.

Unknowing silence, on the other hand, is the silence that occurs when someone cannot find a way to appropriately express their experiences (Degerman, 2024a: 2793 ff.). These are cases in which what one is willing to describe seems ineffable or appropriate words and concepts might not be available. However, contrary to depressed silence, unknowing silence does not entail a loss of the experienced possibility to speak. In addition, according to Degerman, unknowing silence is an outward silence that can be either pleasant or unpleasant.

Finally, *peaceful silence* is a "pleasant and beneficial" form of silence, that is characterised as involving essentially a form of inner silence – a lack of talking to or within oneself – that may or may not require the presence of outward silence (2024a: 2796 ff.).

Through this account, attention is drawn, directly and indirectly, to how a key aspect of the phenomenology of silence has to do with the possibilities we perceive ourselves as having in relation to others', our own, and environmental silences. Whether and how we are able to interact with the absence of sounds or speech seems indeed consequential to whether silences are experienced as pleasant or unpleasant and in what manners.

Degerman's analysis, for example, points to the fact that experiences of "possibility" (or lack of) (e.g. the possibility to find some words) are intertwined with experiences of depressed silence (2024a: 2792), and it has been argued that a diminishment of social agency also marks these experiences (Sul, 2025). In addition, also imposed silence and unknowing silence seem to involve the sense that speaking, or, more broadly, certain forms of communication, are not really possible for the subject for different reasons. These are the presence of stigma and prejudice in imposed silence, and the lack of appropriate linguistic or conceptual tools to describe one's experience in unknowing silence. In peaceful silence, on the contrary, speaking or communicating is perceived as an open possibility for the subject, but a choice is made not to pursue it.

Furthermore, the sense of possibility also seems to play a role in other, "noncognitive" (Meadows, 2020) accounts of silence. An example of this is Ian Phillips' account of silence as potentially a form of "objectless consciousness", namely a type of awareness that is not directed at specific objects and through which the capacity of listening is enabled (2013). Phillips illustrates how experiencing silence may genuinely amount to *hearing* silence (as opposed, for example, to simply knowing that silence is present), arguing that "[o]ne's awareness can be thought of as genuinely auditory, even when there is no sound present, because it is a mode of awareness within which listening can occur" (2013: 357).

In the next sections of this study, I will argue that experiences of possibility are also central to the phenomenology of silence in social anxiety, and I will maintain that these are shaped by a particular set of feelings.

3.1 Silence and Social Anxiety

It seems that all the forms of silence discussed by Degerman with regard to disturbances of mood can also be present in some anxiety disorders,[4] including social anxiety.

Anxiety sufferers frequently feel unable to communicate their experiences and are afraid to display anxiety symptoms (APA, 2022: 230), often due to the fear that these experiences will be negatively judged by others. When this is motivated by the awareness of widespread stereotypes and prejudices that can influence other people's judgement, the relevant forms of silence can be considered to be instances of *imposed silence*. This dynamic can also be exacerbated by the increased awareness that sufferers may have of social cues, which are frequently monitored to detect signs of negative assessment on the part of others (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Integral to this can be an acute sense of the stigmatising or misleading connotations that the words through which we talk about anxiety may have. This is exemplified, for instance, by the following passages of Emily Ford's memoir:

> "The fear of having my problems belittled or hearing someone tell me that I was 'just shy' kept me locked in needless silence for years." (Ford, 2007: 38).

> "I haltingly tried to express this thought to Dr. Q., choosing my words carefully. But I had trouble getting the thought out because I kept mentally backtracking, worrying about how Dr. Q. would perceive my words." (Ford, 2007: 75–76).

The experience of imposed silence can also be brought about or intensified when social anxiety is accompanied by other mental health conditions, in particular mood disorders (cf. Adams et al., 2016; Kessler et al., 1999). Social anxiety sufferers can thus experience silence that results from stigma and prejudice surrounding other forms of mental ill-health and their disclosure too. As Ford herself explains:

> "Then one afternoon, my psychology professor called me to his desk to ask if I was depressed. He reassured me that it wasn't obvious, but explained that he had experience identifying the signs and apparently I fit the bill. I desperately wanted to say 'yes,' but I couldn't squeeze the word from my throat, so instead I nervously shook my head 'no.' Those old what ifs resurfaced with a vengeance: What if I admitted to feeling depressed? Would it seem like a pathetic ploy for attention? Would I be told to seek professional help? What if I said 'yes' but the professional said 'no way'?" (2007: 42).

Independently of whether a diagnosis of depression is received, it is arguable that what Degerman discusses under the label of "*depressed silence*" can also affect those who are profoundly socially anxious.

[4] Within the DSM's classification (APA, 2022), "anxiety disorders" are distinguished from both "depressive disorders" and "bipolar and related disorders", which are the categories under which the main conditions discussed by Degerman (2024a, b) (i.e. depression and bipolar disorder) are comprised.

Depressed silence, as outlined previously, involves the experience of losing or lacking the words that one would need, and this is also a phenomenon that appears to be pointed to in memoirs of anxiety and social anxiety. For example, in his autobiographical account of living with anxiety, Scott Stossel, reports the following testimony from his sister, herself a social anxiety sufferer:

> "'Social situations that normal people breeze through unthinkingly cause my brain to shut down,' she says. 'I can never think of what to say.'" (2014: 120).

In addition, social anxiety itself can be accompanied by phenomena analogous to those associated with depression – for example, the presence of negative self-evaluations (Moscovitch et al., 2009; Beck and Alford, 2009: 22). Being socially anxious can indeed go hand in hand with the belief that one does not have anything valuable or appropriate to say, and the experience that one does not have the words that it would be good to be able to utter in certain social circumstances. Other passages in Stossel's memoir seem to point in this direction:

> "Once, in college, I applied for a fellowship that required me to sit for an interview with a committee of half a dozen faculty members, most of whom I was already friendly with. We bantered easily before the official proceedings began. But when the interview started and they asked me the first formal question, my chest constricted and I could make no sound emerge from my trachea. I sat there, mouth silently gaping open and then shutting like some kind of fish or suckling mammal. When finally I was able to get my voice to work, I excused myself and scurried out […]." (2014: 110)[5]

These experiences seem to parallel the "breakdown in the near presence of words" that Degerman associates with severe depression (2024b). For those who are socially anxious too words are no longer seamlessly found, and their absence – and the silences that this originates – are something that one becomes very acutely aware of. In other terms, the phenomenology of social phobia further exemplifies the reflective nature of empty silences identified by Degerman as a mark of depression.

As a result, anxiety and social anxiety may be marked by a proliferation of self-doubt so profound that the ability to exercise some basic capacities – among which, speaking – is also disrupted. Not only words can escape one, but the sense of there being well-formed thoughts that can be worded and spoken may be eroded. This is hinted at in Ford's memoir:

> "I doubted my competency to do anything to the point of being unable to talk in complete sentences. I was forever backtracking, worrying that what I said five

[5] One may observe that what is described in these cases is not a loss or lack of words, but rather the inability to utter words that are present. I think that this is possible, and if so, what is at stake here may indeed be a form of silence different from depressed silence, and, rather akin to the type of silences that I will argue are not fully captured by Degerman's taxonomy. However, given that experiences of loss or lack of words are described by social anxiety sufferers, and that these descriptions resonate with accounts of depressed silence, it seems that some anxiety silences are indeed akin to depressed silence.

> words earlier might have been interpreted in a way I didn't intend. I no longer knew how high to raise my hand in class, and asking to excuse myself to use the bathroom seemed like the most embarrassing task in the world." (2007: 24).

It is plausible that *unknowing silence* itself can mark the experience of social anxiety. Like other forms of mental ill-health, anxiety involves a complex range of thoughts, feelings, and desires, that, due also to societal stigma and prejudice, have typically been less prominent and visible in the way in which people talk about themselves and others. As such, the difficulty of disclosing these experiences due to the fear of being negatively judged can be compounded by the presence of fewer hermeneutical resources (e.g. language and concepts) through which to make sense of one's own experiences. Consequently, the silence of persons who are socially anxious can be both imposed and unknowing.

Finally, peaceful silence too can play a role in the phenomenology of social anxiety. An integral aspect of this condition is indeed the presence of negative self-talk.[6] Social situations are anticipated and undergone with distress as one expects that, in these circumstances, other people will judge them negatively due to their appearances, behaviour, or personal traits. These expectations can be voiced or exacerbated through negative inner speech. This is outlined, with regard to the experience of anxiety more broadly, in Daniel Smith's memoir. As he explains:

> "The more attention I paid to the mechanics of my anxiety the more I began to notice an aspect of my mind I'd never noticed before—a sort of subconscious chatter, just beneath the surface of awareness, that was always going, always yammering, always commentating, like a little newscaster perched on my frontal lobes. And this newscaster, it turned out, was not the kind of person you'd want to sit next to at a dinner party. He was very pessimistic, my mental homunculus. If there was even a slim chance that a situation could end in calamity, he'd toss it up on the teleprompter and treat it like news." (2013: 200).

Similarly, in her memoir, Andrea Petersen observes that:

> "Even when my anxiety is at a lower volume, it is still a pushy neighbor: chatty, intrusive, and often boring as hell." (2017: 189).

This self-talk can in turn interfere with the person's ability to manage interactions, inhibiting self-expression and making actions less spontaneous. On the contrary, when sufferers manage to avoid or to mitigate the anxiety, this results in regaining naturalness or spontaneity in social encounters (Bortolan, 2022: 317-8), and an aspect of this is a weakening or disappearance of the negative self-talk. This amounts to a pleasant experience of inner silence that is beneficial is so far as it allows the person to be more focused on the outside world, and to more easily interact with others.

[6] This is illustrated by first-person reports but also by some empirical research. For example, negative "automatic thoughts" have been found to be more frequently present in SAD (Iancu et al., 2015).

As such, it seems appropriate to say that, in these cases, social anxiety sufferers can experience a form of *peaceful silence*.[7]

4 Filling the Silence: Inability To Speak and Lack of Control

As illustrated above, the taxonomy of silence developed by Degerman with regard to mood disorders is very helpful to also illuminate a range of experiences undergone by social anxiety sufferers. However, at the core of the phenomenology of social phobia there are also forms of silence that are not captured by the distinctions explored so far.[8] Further drawing on first-personal reports, in the following I will argue that these experiences have to do with the felt perception socially anxious people may have of their (in)capacity to fill silences, and to control how these silences are filled.

Some persons with social anxiety report that, when interacting with others in situations that are anxiety-inducing, they are unable to speak when it would be an appropriate time for them to do so. While this dynamic may involve a failure to find the right words to express what one wants to communicate, descriptions of this experience suggest that, in some cases at least, the right words are known to the speaker, but they cannot be uttered when the person would like to do so. For example, words may fail to be pronounced, they may remain 'stuck' in one's throat or chest, or they may be "swallowed". For example, when describing some of her attempts to communicate with her fellow students, Ford offers the following description:

> "I attempted to speak, but the words caught in my throat. I was sure my voice sounded childish, and I foresaw rolled eyes and bored reactions to what I wanted to say. By the time I had finally settled upon the words I wanted to speak and the voice I intended to use, the moment had long since passed, and everyone had moved on to a new subject. I swallowed the unused words and blinked back tears." (2007: 27–28).

In addition, Ford offers the following account of her experience when undertaking the duties of a teaching job:

[7] It is possible to wonder whether, in these cases, all inner speech has generally quietened, or negative self-talk has been replaced by neutral or positive ways of talking to oneself. In partial conflict with Degerman's characterisation of peaceful silence (2024a), one could indeed argue that at least some of the silences that we experience as pleasant and beneficial do not entail the absence of inner speech, but rather the presence of particular manners of inner "speaking" (e.g. encouraging or non-ruminative).

[8] In addition to discussing the four types of silence detailed above, in his paper Degerman also lists other silences that may be present in mood disorders, i.e. "intimate", "obtrusive", "defiant", "tactical", "protective", "healing" (2024a). These silences are not explored extensively, but some of their characteristics are briefly outlined in a table in the final section of the article (2799). From the information included there, it seems to me that the distinctive forms of silence I identify in relation to social anxiety are not captured by these notions either. However, Degerman's notion of "obtrusive silence" could be linked to one aspect of the first form of socially anxious silence I discuss in this section (namely the sense that the silence is hard or impossible to bear).

> "My free periods were supposed to be spent making telephone calls to the students' parents, but I couldn't do it. The phone was in a shared office space, and knowing that someone could easily overhear me speaking about my class made it impossible to squeeze the words from my throat." (Ford, 2007: 60).

Similarly, describing an episode identified with the onset of his performance anxiety at age eleven, Stossel highlights the difficulty to speak:

> "[…] when I walked to center stage and looked out into the auditorium to see all those eyes upon me, my chest constricted. After a few seconds, I found myself in the grip of both physical and emotional panic, and I could barely speak. I eked out a few quavering lines with a diminishing voice–and then arrived at a point where I could make no more words emerge." (2014: 108).

These instances of silence are different from *imposed silences* because the lack of expression of one's experiences in these cases does not seem to be caused by external factors such as the presence of stigma against one's condition. Both imposed silences and the inability to fill the silence are forms of outward silence that do not seem to involve inner silence. However, the causes of silence, in the experiences of social anxiety we are considering, appear to be internal. This is the case because what prevents expression in the relevant instances of social anxiety is the speaker's own perception of themselves (and their expectations about how they will be judged by others), where such perception and expectations are not primarily related to the threat of stigma (although it is plausible that they might be exacerbated by it).

The notion of *depressed silence* too does not seem to fit these occurrences. Indeed, while depressed silence is characterised by the lack or loss of words through which one can communicate, those who experience the anxious silences here at issue are in possession of the words that are needed, but feel unable to express them. As outlined in the reports above, the words are experienced as being present, but – as illustrated by descriptions that portray them as physical objects that obstruct one's airways or chest, or as being unmovable – they are impervious to communicative attempts.

For similar reasons, the inability to fill the silence which can mark social anxiety is different from *unknowing silences*, in so far as the person who is socially anxious, in these circumstances, is not unsure about what to say, but rather struggles to express what they want to communicate. In these cases, the social anxiety sufferer may be trying to describe their condition (although this is not necessarily the case, as they may be attempting to communicate something else), and the reason why they fail is not the ineffability of their experience, but rather the encounter of what appears to be an insurmountable barrier to their expressive intent.

Finally, such a perceived inability to fill the silence is also different from *peaceful silences* for two reasons. On the one hand, this is not a pleasant experience, and it is rather a cause of distress as the socially anxious person cannot fulfil their intentions, (and may also be embarrassed by their lack of compliance with the relevant social expectations). On the other hand, contrary to what is the case with peaceful silences, the experience here in question does not involve the presence of inner silence. One's

conscious thought in these cases is indeed populated by the contents that they would like to share but are struggling to communicate, or by negative self-talk.

Like most of the main forms of silence examined by Degerman (2024a), the experiences I have described so far in this section involve "outward" silences, as they concern cases in which the socially anxious person is not speaking, and the absence of speech has a specific phenomenology: one is unable to utter words even if one knows what could or should be said. However, it is important to notice that in social anxiety disorder also what Degerman calls "outside silences" seem to have specific features.

As mentioned earlier on, the notion of outside silence designates the lived experience of an objective silence, namely the absence of talk or sounds in one's environment (Degerman, 2024a: 2787). Indeed, not all objective silences are the same, and often they have a positive or negative valence: for example, certain silences can be oppressive, embarrassing, or awkward, while others can be welcome, soothing, or relaxing. Other silences do not appear to have either positive or negative felt qualities: we feel neutral or indifferent towards them, but arguably this is still a mode of experience. Importantly, the phenomenology of objective silences seems to be shaped by attitudes and expectations concerning the value of those silences and how the experiencing subject can relate to them. For example, oppressive silences are experienced as silences that should be broken, while peaceful silences are to be protected.

For those who experience social anxiety, some objective silences tend to have a specific character: in particular when in the presence of other people, these silences may feel inappropriate or difficult to bear, and as such, as something that needs to be overcome or interrupted. Otherwise said, objective silences may be perceived as something that needs to be filled, and socially anxious persons often perceive themselves as responsible for doing so (cf. Leno, 2025). This may be the case when someone is explicitly asked or required to speak – for instance because one is being queried, or initiating communication is an aspect of one's job, as it was the case in some of the examples considered previously. However, the pressure to fill the silence can also be felt in cases in which there is no explicit or implicit expectation to this extent.

The inability to fill silences that one may also feel responsible for filling, however, does not exhaust the phenomenology of silence in social anxiety. While socially anxious persons may find it very difficult to speak in social situations, there are also circumstances in which the experience of anxiety is accompanied by a different perception of silence, or more precisely, of how silence is overcome. Those who suffer from social phobia can indeed at times be very talkative, and anxiety has been associated with increased speech rates (Pope et al., 1970). Due to being nervous because of the fear of being negatively judged by others, or in an attempt to avoid or mitigate possible negative outcomes – what is also referred to as a "safety behaviour" (cf. Gray et al., 2019) – one can become very chatty and adept at avoiding or overcoming silences. As such, objective silences that are perceived as difficult to bear may be broken. However, a distinctive feature of these experiences is that the person who is feeling anxious may also feel a lack or loss of control over the way in which they fill the silence.

This may involve the sense that one is talking too much (cf. Kraft, 2022): for example, one may feel that they are speaking longer than they should, or that they are not giving their interlocutors enough room in the conversation. Importantly, this can be experienced as happening unintentionally: the speaker may not want to talk or do so in the way in which they do, but they feel that they have little or no control over this. Therefore, rather than an experience of one's own silence, this seems to involve an inability to modulate or bring about that silence.[9]

Some of these dynamics seem to be pointed at by Smith in his own memoir of anxiety, where he describes the experience of some anxiety sufferers:

> "[…] around people, and especially in tense interpersonal situations, they are brought into a state of such high psychological pressure that all the valves pop open of their own accord, everything is released in a geyser of physicality and verbiage, and what you get is a kind of shimmery, barely stable equilibrium between internal and external states, like in those rudimentary cartoons where the outlines of the characters continuously squiggle and undulate."(Smith, 2013: 93).

The sense that one is unable to manage how the silence is being filled, however, does not concern only how long one is speaking or how they balance their and other people's role in a conversation. The perceived lack or loss of control can apply also to aspects of the contents that are conveyed.

It has been suggested that the interaction style of social anxiety sufferers has specific features. For instance, it has been claimed that social anxiety sufferers communicate in ways that are less likely to cause disagreement (Schlenker & Leary, 1985), and tend to modulate less the level of intimacy they display in interaction based on the behaviour of interlocutors (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). However, although some studies have suggested that socially anxious persons tend to self-disclose less in social interactions, others indicate that, at least in some circumstances or for some groups of socially anxious persons, this is not the case (cf. Cuming & Rapee, 2010). For example, those who are socially anxious may engage more in self-talk and reassurance seeking in interaction (Heerey & Kring, 2007), and anxiety has been associated with "oversharing" online (Shabahang et al., 2022). Relatedly, when socially anxious, one may feel that they are accidentally revealing things that they should not be sharing, or that they are bringing up or insisting on topics of conversation that are not appropriate in the context.

[9] This has some similarities with experiences that Degerman has identified as playing a role in manic episodes in bipolar disorder (2024a: 2796) and more recently investigated (2025). I believe, however, that there are some important phenomenological differences between social anxiety and mania in this regard. For example, while some socially anxious persons seem to experience a weakened sense of control over their speech (i.e. a diminishment of a capacity that is normally present), the internal "pressure" to speak (cf. 2025: 252), or an intense urge or inclination towards talking is more salient in manic episodes. In addition, both the form and content of speech in manic episodes seem to have characteristic features. For example, the DSM (APA, 2022: 144) indicates that in these instances individuals may talk "in an intrusive manner or without concern for the relevance of what is said" and "[l]oudness and forcefulness of speech often become more important than what is conveyed". In addition, these dynamics can be frequently influenced by experiences associated with "flight of ideas".

Further to this, persons who are socially anxious may also experience a lack or loss of control concerning specifically the information that they convey about themselves in an interaction. When we are under pressure, it is not uncommon to feel that we are not controlling what we say as well as we do when we are calm and relaxed. Indeed, after we have been put on the spot or have felt nervous during a conversation, we may find ourselves wondering 'why did I say that?', regretting to have disclosed something that we had not really intended to share. In the case of social anxiety, these dynamics can also have a specific character.

It has been shown that, comparatively, those who suffer from social anxiety tend to describe themselves in less positive terms, and to emphasise less the possession of qualities that could draw attention to them (e.g. Schlenker & Leary, 1985). From a phenomenological perspective, however, these dynamics do not appear to always be deliberate and, rather, there may be a perceived lack or loss of control on the part of the subject over the way in which they depict themselves.

Those who suffer from social anxiety tend to have negative self-beliefs that not only are unwarranted, but are also resistant to change (cf. Gregory & Peters, 2017). This means that, when information that is in conflict with one's negative self-image becomes available, it is difficult to integrate it within one's existing knowledge and update one's self-conception accordingly. This may lead to situations where inaccurate self-descriptions are inadvertently conveyed.

For example, as someone who suffers from this form of anxiety, I have found that, in social circumstances that for me are anxiety-generating, I am prone to describing myself in ways that are imprecise or distorted, and this happens without having an intention to be vague or misleading. For instance, in a recent conversation with a colleague, I intended to describe the work I had done on that particular morning, and I reported that I had written a modest 200 or 300 words, while in fact I had written twice as much and had had a very productive start of the day.

What I have just described was not intentional: I was not aiming to lie about how much I had written, and indeed I had intended to truthfully describe to my colleague what I had been up to that morning. The words through which I conveyed an inaccurate account of how much I had written just seemed to come out of my mouth before I could even realise that I was making such a mistake.

In sum, my suggestion is that the experience of lacking control over how silences are filled can take a particular form in social anxiety, revolving around aspects that are relevant to how the self is perceived and evaluated by others. In the next and final section of this study, I am going to explore some of the experiences that may be at the origin of these and other aspects of the phenomenology of silence in social phobia, exploring also how they can shed light on the dimensions of lived experience that should be taken into account when we think about silence more broadly.

5 Affective Self-Experience and Silence

So far, I have suggested that social anxiety may be accompanied by both a perceived inability to fill certain silences when one wants to do so, and a weakened sense of control over how silences are filled. I will now argue that the consideration of these

dynamics draws attention to the centrality of affective self-experience to the phenomenology of silence.

As I pointed out above, Degerman's research highlights how experiences of possibility (or lack of) are intertwined with different types of lived silence. Similarly, the different forms of silence that I have talked about in relation to social anxiety involve a felt sense that certain actions or manners of acting are not possible for one. As suggested earlier, social anxiety sufferers may indeed feel that they cannot speak when they would like to, or that they cannot fully control how they speak when they do so.

It seems then important to spell out exactly what kind of experiences a sense of possibility amounts to, and how it can be modulated. In this regard, as pointed out by Degerman (2024a, b) with reference to the diminished sense of possibility that marks depressed silence, a helpful framework is provided by research within the field of philosophical phenomenology. Of particular relevance in this context is the phenomenological investigation of affectivity and the idea, articulated by Matthew Ratcliffe (2012, 2015) that the "possibility space" we inhabit is grounded in specific forms of affective experience.

Central to Ratcliffe's account is the notion of "existential feelings" (2005, 2008), which are characterised as affective "background orientations" (2008: 2) that have a non-intentional structure but play a key role in shaping intentionality. More specifically, these affective states (contrary to those that are often referred to as "emotions") are not typically directed to intentional objects (Ratcliffe, 2012: 24-25) (e.g. persons, events or states of affairs), but Ratcliffe's account suggests that they constrain how we relate to such objects, determining which kinds of intentional mental states it is possible for us to entertain (2010: 604). In other terms, depending on the existential feelings I am in, there will be certain judgements, emotions, and desires that it will be possible for me to hold or experience, while others will be precluded. This is an important reason why existential feelings are characterised as "ways of finding oneself in the world" that profoundly shape multiple dimensions of our life (2005, 2008) and "constitute a changeable sense of reality and belonging which can be construed as a possibility space" (Ratcliffe, 2012: 38).[10]

Contemporary research in phenomenology has also drawn attention to the existence and importance of specific kinds of affective background orientations: these are what I will call "self-focused" orientations, not because they do not have an impact on how we experience the world, but rather because they convey specific forms of self-experience. Jan Slaby, for example, has argued that our experiences as embodied agents are accompanied by a "self-feeling" and, in particular a "sense of ability" which he characterises as a felt perception of one's capacities and potentialities that impacts on one's phenomenology as a whole, and is akin to existential feelings (2012: 153). In Slaby's words:

[10] Ratcliffe has suggested that the phenomenology of severe depression is marked by transformations of existential feelings that lead to a narrowing of one's sense of possibility (e.g. 2010, 2015), and Degerman acknowledges that depressed silence may be an aspect of this predicament (2024a: 2792). While I agree with this point, in this study I advance a broader claim, namely that also other types of silence are imbued with a sense of possibility, and that this is modulated by a specific set of existential feelings.

> "A person's felt relatedness to the world is nothing other than the fundamental sense of ability at the base of his or her perspective on the world—a sense of ability that is at any time bound up with aspects of one's concrete situation. This embodied, modifiable sense of '*I can*' and '*I cannot*' shapes the way the world, others, and oneself are apprehended." (2012: 153).

Building on these insights, in my previous work (Bortolan, 2018, 2020, 2023) I have suggested that also what we often refer to as "self-esteem" can be understood as a felt sense of self-worth having the structure of an existential feeling. From this perspective, self-esteem is a complex experience of oneself as valuable to different degrees, which constrains the way in which we think and feel about ourselves, but also how we perceive, and relate to, others and the world. At one extreme of the spectrum, when self-esteem is very low, this may result in our sense of possibility being extremely narrowed down. For example, if one experienced themselves as utterly unworthy, achieving something good or important would not appear as a real or 'live' option for them, and this would translate into a specific range of thoughts, feelings, or actions, modulating also self-knowledge (cf. Bortolan, 2020, 2023). For instance, positive self-evaluations – and emotions that are consistent with them, such as pride – would be unlikely to be entertained, while negative self-assessments would more easily become central to the person's self-concept (Bortolan, 2023: 132). A detailed discussion, or defence, of this account of self-esteem would exceed the scope of this paper. However, what I think is important to highlight is that, from a phenomenological point of view, one's experience of possibility seems to be inextricable from one's sense of one's own worthiness, an idea which is corroborated by the exploration of the first-personal experience of mental illness. Indeed, it has been shown that alterations of existential feelings, including self-esteem, go hand in hand with transformations of one's sense of possibility in various forms of mental ill-health (cf. Ratcliffe, 2008; Bortolan, 2023) For example, a sense of self-worth that is particularly low can be accompanied by the felt expectation that any form of valuable achievement is precluded, and in some circumstances can be associated with inaccurate or even delusional thoughts, for example in severe depression (cf. Bortolan, 2024).

But how can the consideration of affective forms of self-experience help us to better understand lived silences, especially in the context of social anxiety?

My suggestion is that, if we look at underlying experiences of ability and the sense of one's value, we may be able to shed further light on how social anxiety sufferers perceive silences as something that they are unable to fill, while also feeling in some instances that they cannot control how such silences are filled.[11]

[11] In his analysis of "empty silences", Degerman (2024b) associates the disruption of the "near presence of words" with experiences of "bodily doubt" (Carel, 2016), namely experiences of reduced confidence in one's embodied capacities. This resonates with the insights I advance in the present section; however, my account differs from Degerman's for two main reasons. In the first place, Degerman sees alterations of trust in one's capacities as a consequence of empty silences, while I take low feelings of ability and self-worth to play a *causal* role in the emergence of the lived silences I discuss and I provide an account of how this is the case. Secondly, the feelings I consider are not reducible to feelings of confidence in one's own body, as, feelings of self-worth encompass, but are not limited to, evaluations of one's own bodily capabilities.

It has been suggested that social anxiety is associated with a low sense of self-worth. Negative self-evaluations (Moscovitch et al., 2009) and lack of confidence in oneself (cf. Tyrer & Emmanuel, 1999: 15–16) have been indicated as characteristic features of social anxiety, and it can be argued on phenomenological grounds that these aspects of social anxiety can be understood as alterations of self-esteem (Bortolan, 2022). If this is the case, taking into consideration the structure of this affective experience can also illuminate how silences are perceived and are related to by those who are socially anxious. More specifically, looking at self-esteem may help us to better comprehend how one's sense of possibility and expectations concerning self and other in interaction are shaped, and how this impacts the person's way of relating to silence.

Due to being an affective background orientation, low self-esteem moulds in profound ways the experience of those who suffer from social anxiety. In particular, evaluations of oneself – and others in relation to or comparison to oneself – are constrained by this affect. The negative self-biases displayed by socially anxious people are arguably rooted in these dynamics (Bortolan, 2022: 315). A low sense of ability and self-worth may indeed lead to the expectation that one will be unable to do or pursue certain things in circumstances that matter to them, and this in turn can affect how one will think, feel, or act in these circumstances. Similarly, this is likely to go hand in hand with an inflated sense of responsibility, especially in circumstances in which difficulties or setbacks are experienced (Jones & Rakovshik, 2019). This, I think, can contribute to explain the two distinct experiences of silence that I previously argued are common in social anxiety.

The first one is the experience of not being able to fill a silence despite having the words, and willingness, to do so. It is arguable that, in these instances, a low sense of ability and self-worth shapes the experiencer's expectations about how they manage interactions, constraining the responses that they will be able to display. If I have an underlying sense of myself as completely unable to be interesting or witty in conversation, for instance, I am likely to experience the attitudes and behaviours associated with those qualities as unachievable for me – experientially, those possibilities will be closed off. The eventuality that I will be able to fill the silence in ways that raise interest or display wittiness would not be felt as a real option, and my attitudes and behaviours would be limited in ways that are consistent with this form of self-experience: I could not possibly utter the right words at the right time (even if I knew what they were), because I would not feel I am good enough to do that.

This, however, does not relieve the social anxiety sufferer of the feeling that it is indeed important for them to be able to fill the relevant silences. The absence of conversation in social interaction is often perceived as uncomfortable also by those who are not socially anxious, and the pressure to feel the silence can be exacerbated in social anxiety. As discussed above, an aspect of social anxiety is indeed an exaggerated sense of one's accountability (Jones & Rakovshik, 2019), and the absence of dialogue may thus tend to be framed as something that one is personally responsible to tackle. This may result in an acutely distressing experience for the social anxiety sufferer as they simultaneously feel called to fill the silence but are unable to produce the words through which to do so.

Relatedly, a phenomenological account of self-esteem can help to clarify also the experience of being unable to control how silences are filled. As I mentioned before, anxiety sufferers may sometimes feel that they are unable to control not only how they say things, but also what they say: not only one may speak too quickly or too much, but what is said may also not correspond to the intentions of the speaker.

A contributing factor to this experience may be the tendency in social anxiety to observe oneself from an external point of view (cf. Bortolan, 2020; Tanaka, 2021), as a result of which one's speech may come to be perceived as somehow detached or impervious to one's efforts to control it. The words flow, stumble, or are lost almost independently of one's own will, in a vicious circle that exacerbates one's pre-existing lack of confidence.

However, as I illustrated above, not only socially anxious persons may have a weakened sense of control over their speech, but what they say can be sometimes imprecise or inaccurate in specific manners (for example by diminishing or underplaying the person's achievements). Considering the experience of low self-esteem can also help us to understand this feature of social phobia.

A low sense of ability and self-worth experienced as a background affective orientation will constrain one's sense of the possible and, relatedly, one's expectations about how events and interactions may unfold, both before and while one engages with such events and interactions (Bortolan, 2022: 315). Feelings of inability and worthlessness and feelings of powerlessness are thus intertwined, and this may lead one to feel that they cannot master their own expressions and behaviours, including how words are uttered – or which words are uttered – in conversation.

As discussed before, the speaker may indeed err, so to speak, on the side of negativity, for instance by diminishing or hiding their accomplishments. This is an example of how a background sense of oneself as "not good enough" can ground specific self-evaluations, shaping one's self-conception and the narratives through which this is conveyed in ways that are consistent with one's self-feeling (Bortolan, 2018, 2023). Furthermore, low self-esteem not only shapes one's assessment of one's own traits and performance, but also one's perception of how others will evaluate oneself. A radically low sense of self-worth may lead one to feel that only a certain set of interactions are possible, namely interactions in which one is judged negatively by others (Bortolan, 2022). This can constrain the person's expectations and actions in conversation, where what is said conforms to the negative image of ourselves that we expect our interlocutors will inevitably have. If we do not experience ourselves as being capable or worthy enough to achieve certain things, for example, we may be inclined to underplay those achievements, to the point of misdescribing and misreporting them.

6 Conclusions

In this study, I have explored the experience of silence in social anxiety, contributing to the philosophical understanding of both the lived nature of silences and the role they may play in the phenomenology of mental ill-health.

I started by drawing on Degerman's taxonomy of silences in mood disorders (2024a), and I argued that all the forms of silence identified within this account – i.e. imposed, depressed, unknowing, and peaceful – can be experienced by those who are socially anxious. I then proceeded to maintain that social anxiety is also marked by the presence of two types of silence that cannot be reduced to the ones identified by Degerman. On the one hand, socially anxious people may feel unable to fill certain silences while knowing how these could be filled. On the other, when silences are filled, in some instances, those who experience social anxiety may feel a lack of control over the manner in which the filling of silence occurs.

I then argued that the specific silences experienced by socially anxious people, and lived silences more broadly, can be best understood as anchored in affective states that shape our sense of possibility, and, in particular, in a felt sense of one's ability and worth. This has enabled me to expand existing accounts of lived silences in mental disorder by suggesting that they are rooted in and modulated by affectively-laden forms of self-experience.

While these insights have a bearing primarily on the phenomenological understanding of silence, and how this is implicated in some forms of mental ill-health, the account I have developed also offers some inputs to debates concerning the nature of the experience of silence in the philosophy of perception.

As outlined before, the phenomenological approach developed by Degerman – and refined and extended in this paper – appears to be in alignment with non-cognitive theories of silence (cf. Meadows, 2020). This is the case because this approach supports the idea that we can experience silence, and that this is different from simply having certain cognitions concerning silence. Neither Degerman's nor my account, however, take a direct stance with regard to whether it is possible to *hear* silences (or the absence of sounds), or, otherwise said, whether silences have a phenomenal character that is distinctly perceptual (and, more specifically, auditory).[12]

The insights expanded upon and advanced in this study rather focus on the idea that the experiential dimension of silence is, to a significant extent, affective, in so far as it involves a specific set of feelings, that is feelings of ability and inability, worth and worthlessness. These feelings contribute to modulate our sense of possibility in relation to our own, others', and environmental silences and this is, as we have seen, a key dimension of experiencing silence in social anxiety.

As noted earlier, the centrality of the sense of possibility also appears to be recognised by some influential accounts within the broader literature. For example, Phillips' characterisation of the experience of silence as an "objectless consciousness" that enables listening (2013) underscores a form of awareness imbued with a sense of perceptual, and in particular, auditory possibilities. The insights presented in this study are compatible with such an account, in so far as they point to a felt sense of potential experiences as core to the phenomenology of silence.[13] However, they also

[12] Nevertheless, the claims I have defended do not rule out the possibility that silences could be both heard and felt.

[13] The phenomenological view I have developed does not entail that the experience of silence does not have any objects. However, my view is in principle compatible with this claim, as the feelings of ability and worth that it appeals to are generally characterised as having a non-intentional structure (cf. Bortolan, 2020). As such, characterising the phenomenology of silence by appealing to the presence of these feel-

pave the way to an expansion of this view, by suggesting that the possibilities that hearing silence is imbued with are not just auditory, but also agentive, as silences are lived as spaces where we are, for example, capable, incapable, or responsible for speaking, and this agency is moulded by affective states.

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ings does not commit one to the idea that experiencing silences involves experiencing certain objects or absences.

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