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The Silent Tree

Epistemic Clientelism and the Politics of Sound

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*An interdisciplinary inquiry into epistemic trust,
subjugated silence, and fiduciary authority across knowledge, culture,
and power.*

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About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

The philosophical riddle ‘If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?’ dramatises a conflict that is not merely metaphysical but epistemic and political. This essay reframes the question through *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*, showing how assent to either physics or phenomenology constitutes a clientelist exchange with epistemic authority. Drawing on Locke, Berkeley, and Kant, alongside phenomenology, cognitive science, and political psychology, I argue that the puzzle exposes our dependence on authority structures. Silence is shown not as absence but as epistemic subjugation, resonant with Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence. Engaging Ivana Marková’s theory of epistemic trust and my own works on epistemocracy, free-range knowledge, and fiduciary openness, I propose that dependence need not degrade into clientelism. Fiduciary authority offers a way forward, binding epistemic power to duties of care, loyalty, and openness. The falling tree thus becomes a parable for our epistemic condition: vibrations exist, perception matters, but what counts as ‘sound’ depends on how authority is structured and how silence is dignified.

Keywords

epistemic clientelism, epistemic trust, fiduciary authority, phenomenology of sound, conformity, authoritarianism, epistemic violence, epistemic agency, free-range knowledge, epistemocracy



1. Introduction – The Tree and the Forest

When a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? The riddle, first popularised in eighteenth-century philosophy, endures because it sits at the intersection of perception, reality, and authority. On one side lies the scientific view: sound is a physical wave, existing regardless of listeners. On the other stands the phenomenological conviction that sound is the quality of hearing, dependent on perception. The tree's fall thus crystallises a deeper question: is knowledge independent of observers, or constituted by them?

2. Classical Anchors: Locke, Berkeley, and Kant

Locke distinguished primary qualities such as shape and motion, existing independently, from secondary qualities like colour and sound, dependent upon perceivers {Locke 1690}. The tree's vibrations are primary; its sound, secondary. Berkeley radicalised this position: to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*). If no one hears, there is no sound {Berkeley 1710}. Kant reframed the issue: phenomena appear only through the categories of human cognition; sound is neither object nor sensation alone, but structured appearance {Kant 1781/1787}. Each position implies epistemic patronage. To align with Locke is to defer to empiricism, with Berkeley to idealism, with Kant to transcendental philosophy. Each is a clientelist exchange: epistemic autonomy traded for conceptual security {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}.

3. Phenomenology and the Embodied Ear

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is embodied disclosure, not detached recording {Merleau-Ponty 1945}. Don Ihde argued that sound is not stimulus added to experience but the very medium of world-disclosure {Ihde 1976}. In this light, to ask about

sound without hearers risks incoherence. Yet such phenomenological authority itself risks marginalisation within academic hierarchies, where measurable physics dominates {Kahl 2025, *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories Are Not Emperors*}. The unheard tree thus becomes allegory for epistemic violence, where non-sanctioned ways of knowing are silenced {Spivak 1988; Fricker 2007}.

4. Cognitive Science and the Fragility of Perception

Neuroscience demonstrates that conformity penetrates perception itself: people literally see and hear differently under group pressure {Berns 2005; Klucharev 2009}. Asch showed individuals deny sensory evidence to conform {Asch 1951}; Milgram showed obedience to epistemic authority against conscience {Milgram 1963}. Feldman interpreted authoritarian predispositions as amplifications of this autonomy–conformity conflict {Feldman 2003}. The riddle is thus not idle: it encodes the same psychology sustaining authoritarian regimes. The unheard tree becomes the event leaders declare did not happen — and citizens repeat the silence to secure belonging {Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}.

5. Trust, Authority, and the Unheard Tree

Marková defines epistemic trust as the dialogical bond enabling shared reality {Marková 2025}. Without such trust, the tree's fall remains unregistered: vibrations without 'sound'. Silence here is relational absence, not physical absence. Authority decides whether the fall 'counts'. Cultural scripts show this: Japanese and Turkish proverbs tie epistemic legitimacy to conformity {Güngör et al. 2014}. The puzzle becomes less about airwaves and more about who is authorised to say they were heard.

6. Silence as Resistance and Subjugation

Silence is never neutral. In *Foucault's Dream* I argued that institutions domesticate knowledge, rendering it visible only when sanctioned {Kahl 2025, *Foucault's Dream*}. The unheard tree exemplifies what resists domestication. Spivak's 'epistemic violence' is the suppression of marginal voices {Spivak 1988}. In academia, peer review performs this violence {Kahl 2025, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review*}. The tree's silence is allegory for the unsanctioned manuscript, the indigenous epistemology excluded from curricula, the gaslit testimony in intimate life {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships*}.

7. Free-Range Knowledge and Courage to Hear Otherwise

In *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?* I argued that academia fears unsanctioned knowledge, burying its head like the ostrich scholar {Kahl 2025, *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?*}. The tree's unheard fall is precisely such free-range knowledge: existing without approval, unlicensed, uncatalogued. To acknowledge it demands courage — not kneeling before epistemic patrons but lifting the head to see.

8. Epistemic Agency and Resistance

Nieminen and Ketonen define epistemic agency as the capacity to evaluate, produce, and transform knowledge {Nieminen & Ketonen 2023}. Assessment regimes often suppress it, positioning students as customers rather than knowers. The unheard tree mirrors this: knowledge that exists but is unrecognised. Epistemic agency is the power to resist silence, to affirm that sound exists even when institutions refuse to register it. Collyer's study of the neoliberal academy shows how conformity and resistance together reproduce academic capitalism {Collyer 2015}. The riddle thus reflects everyday epistemic struggles: to assent uncritically is conformity; to reframe the puzzle is resistance.

9. Authoritarian Risks and the Currency of Silence

Authoritarian regimes weaponise silence, demanding citizens affirm that the tree did not fall unless the leader says so {Feldman 2003; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}. In journalism, institutional corruption leads to epistemic clientelism where narratives reflect elite interests {Kahl 2025, *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism*}. In intimacy, authoritarian partners gaslight others into denying perception {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships*}. The riddle exposes how silence becomes political currency.

10. Fiduciary Authority and Hearing Otherwise

In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* I argued that dependence can be dignified when authority is bound by fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and openness {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. In *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*, I extended this to academia: an oath to integrate fiduciary duties with epistemic virtues {Kahl 2025, *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*}. Applied to the tree, fiduciary authority means recognising both vibrations and silence without demanding exclusive allegiance. It reframes the puzzle: the issue is not whether there is sound, but whether institutions hear responsibly.

11. Conclusion – The Tree as Epistemic Parable

The falling tree allegorises our epistemic condition. Vibrations occur; perception matters; silence signifies. But what counts as 'sound' depends on authority, trust, and institutional structures. The riddle endures because it discloses the ubiquity of epistemic clientelism: knowledge becomes real only when sanctioned. The task is not to abolish dependence but to rebind it — to transform

clientelism into fiduciary stewardship. To think is not to kneel and nod, but to lift the head and see {Kahl 2025, *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?*}. The forest calls us to that courage. The unheard tree is waiting.



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