

GABRIEL ABEND. *WORDS AND DISTINCTIONS FOR THE COMMON GOOD: PRACTICAL REASON IN THE LOGIC OF SOCIAL SCIENCE.* PRINCETON AND OXFORD: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 464 P. ISBN: 978-0-691-24706-9

DAVID ZEITLYN¹

An end to (implicit) ontology?

Gabriel Abend's book is subversive in many ways. He pitches it as a reorientation of social science away from implicit ontological commitments that can only lead to trouble, towards a more explicitly moral undertaking. Who can oppose this? Who could be against morality? By purifying the area we are forced, he argues, to recognise an inescapable element of morality in all we (social scientists of whatever stripe) do.

My hope is to make things better for social science research. Help social scientists improve their word uses and distinctions, improve the quality of their arguments, and get away from confused and fruitless disputes [about whether a burrito is a sandwich, Pluto a planet, Begin a terrorist, ideology a form of power etc etc]. (310)

He introduces two contrasting (but deeply interconnected) activities that characterise sociology and other social sciences including anthropology. He calls these *Activity WF* (WF= word first) and *Activity DF* (DF= discrimination/classification first). The confused and fruitless disputes alluded to in the quote above are from the unacknowledged ontological commitments implicit in statements such as 'terrorism is X', 'power is Y'. The problem lies in the copula: the thrust of 'is' is to link words with the world. Confusing, perhaps impossible, and untestable says Abend. We would do better, make a more modest sociology, if we refrain from such claims. We can still do a lot: discussing how terrorism should be understood or how terrorists can be distinguished from freedom fighters (if at all). Better to be modest and concentrate on what is doable: *Activity WF* and *Activity DF* which are hard enough, complex enough without being riven by arguments about ontology (what's in the world). I note this is a return to older, more philosophical understandings of ontology rather than the way it has been used in anthropology in what was once called the ontological turn (but now seems so old hat). And to be clear these activities (WF and DF) are preliminaries – about the way actual research projects are framed rather than the research projects themselves. But Abend argues we need less criticism that invokes different ontological understandings of the world: 'that is not what terrorism is' which ultimately cannot be resolved by research. The maxim is: never

¹ Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. ORCID: 0000-0001-5853-7351. Email: david.zeitlyn@anthro.ox.ac.uk

ask ‘what-is-F?’ questions. He quotes one of my favourite ideas ‘essentially contested concepts’ (from William Gallie), although he is not a fan of the idea of concepts in general. And *Activity WF* and *Activity DF* ‘aren’t truth-apt. Unlike empirical research, their results aren’t truth claims’ (329). This is absolutely NOT an argument for relativism, for abdication from forms of realism. His point rather is that unexamined ontological commitments make for trouble. We can do more and better anthropology and sociology without needing them. The ontological questions should be decided by wider social groups than cliques of academics. This is one of the ways in which the book is subversive. Critical realists will say he has fallen for the ‘epistemic fallacy’, but I think that is wrong. For all its length this is a preliminary work about the practice of social science. As such Abend is not denying that ontological questions obtain but he is saying they are less pressing on research practice than is usually thought.

In the wonderfully titled appendix (Make Pluto Great Again) he points out that ‘A widespread assumption—shared by scientists, the public, and the media—was that “what is a planet?” and “how to define ‘planet?’” were interchangeable, getting at the same thing’ (341). He thinks *assuming* that interchangeability is a bad thing and that it has hugely detrimental consequences for social science. Much is made of inverted commas, quote marks: Discussing Pluto you have to distinguish “‘Definition of ‘planet.’” Then: “‘Definition of Planet.’” The former is about a word, in quotation marks, and the latter about a thing.’ (343-4). How many planets are there? Easy to ask, hard to answer: 8 (without Pluto), 9 (with Pluto), 110 (with Pluto-like objects). ‘It depends what you mean by “planet”’. Ah ha, says Abend, gotcha: this is no longer about the solar system but about words and their meanings. He continues to show how the disputes in astronomy resemble those elsewhere: in taxation law about what makes something a sandwich (do burritos count?) or a product such as bread (are tacos included?). In social science what constitutes gender, terrorism, nations etc. Better to leave such constitutional issues to wider groups than social scientists who have enough on their plate trying to design good research projects (353 ff.). Hence my title, although it should more accurately be put as an end (or an abstention perhaps?) to making (implicit) ontological commitments.

As part of *Activity WF* he insists that ‘you can’t *discover* how to use “w.” There’s no fact of the matter about it. In light of this fact, here’s a proscription for social science communities to consider: no turning down manuscripts or dismissing applications and candidates on semantic grounds, by making top-down semantic claims’ (320 my emphasis). Rather than semantics being fixed facts about the world, these are (disputable) facts about a community (here of social scientists), about the decisions on word usage they have made and may change.

The book is also subversive in its writing style which is refreshingly free of jargon. At the risk of parody, I will try and channel my inner Abend thus. His style is refreshingly different from the norm. I characterise it by giving three features. These are 1. absence of jargon, 2. a love of lists, 3 short sentences.

1. absence of jargon. The writing is a wonderful change from the norm. Abend manages to write about complex subjects without indulging or succumbing to the paralyzing infection often caught in graduate school suggesting that English sentences which ape French in translation have more theoretical heft. Eschewing jargon does not mean he avoids complex topics or long words: I had to look up a couple (propaedeutic: a preliminary summary or an introduction to something (201), lagniappe: a return gift or a gratuity. (268)). The scholarship is stupendous, and the bibliography encyclopaedic ranging from Plato to Haraway. I point to a couple of fellow travellers (a project and some fellow travelling words) that are omitted below but in a work of this scope, such is inevitable.

2. lists. He does like a list, and he likes numbering them all the more. In the main text there are many, many numbered lists including a fourteen-pointer (starting 154 ending on 160).

There is also a table of the Desiderata of scientific projects which has 50 numbered entries (table 9.1 252ff) later grouped into 9 categories. Yes, lists and numbered entries can help. But in a long book like this, their use just seemed a bit too much to this reader.

3. short sentences. Enough said.

The text has a studied casualness that is occasionally overdone. It may have been ok to have some uses of ‘guys’ (is 47 an instance of ‘some?’) but that 25 of them were actually ‘you guys’ seems overdone. More work for the copy editor.

Parallels and connections not made

He writes well about how theory is not a thing (201). What is not mentioned but might have helped the argument, is the literature on misplacing concretism and reification. These bogeys of anthropology set recurring traps as Bateson warned us – following Whitehead’s use of *misplaced concretism* (Bateson 1980 [1958 2nd, 1936 1st]; second edition: 262-3). On the closely connected term *reification*, see Kavoulakos (2019) for clarifying the distinction between the more general sense from the Marxist sense (to which I am *not* alluding). Marilyn Strathern talks about objectification as well as reification in the *Gender of the gift* (1988: 176, 180).

The other parallel that leaped out at me is about multilingualism. On page 299 he briefly discusses the possibility that ‘social science work on “power” in American English and on “Macht” in Standard German couldn’t be said to be about the same thing.’ Here I think the *Dictionary of untranslatables* project would have been helpful (see, e.g., Cassin 2014 [2004], 2009 and Apter 2015). Not that it changes his argument but rather would strengthen it.

To conclude I will quote the start of the Acknowledgments section which I hope will give a good feel for the writing style and humour of this important book. Abend extends an invitation to us (social researchers) to join the discussion, to help work out how we can do things (organise social research) better.

Acknowledgments

The Public Performance of gratitude undermines genuine gratitude. Acknowledgment sections are front regions. In thanking a fancy scholar for their feedback, I’m making it known that I have a relationship with them and they’re interested in my work. In thanking a fancy organization, I’m making it known that I was awarded one of its coveted fellowships or grants. Acknowledging acknowledgment sections’ perverse qualities and effects doesn’t annul them. Saying that you’re genuinely grateful doesn’t make your gratitude genuine. If anything, the adverb ‘genuinely’ is a suspicious word choice. (369)

Bibliography

Apter, Emily 2015. Lexilalia: on translating a dictionary of untranslatable philosophical terms, *Paragraph* 38/2, 159-173. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2015.0155>.

Bateson Gregory 1980 [1958 2nd, 1936 1st]. *Naven: a survey of the problems suggested by a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view*. Second Edition

Cassin, Barbara 2009. Untranslatables and their translations: a logbook, *Transeuropéennes*. URL:

www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/voir_pdf/83/Untranslatables_and_their_Translations.html (accessed 8 January 2025)

--- (ed.) 2014 [2004]. *Dictionary of untranslatables: a philosophical lexicon*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kavoulakos, Konstantinos 2019. Reification, in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *The international encyclopedia of ethics*, 1-8. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Strathern, Marilyn 1988. *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

This work is copyright of the author.

It has been published by JASO under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NonDerivatives ShareAlike License (CC BY NC ND 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal as long as it is non-commercial and that those using the work must agree to distribute it under the same license as the original. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

