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A Collective Object for the Sociology of Morality Project

OMAR LIZARDO

University of Notre Dame
olizardo@nd.edu

Gabriel Abend's *The Moral Background* is the most important book in the sociology of morality published since the field has been "rediscovered" in the wake of the "new sociology of morality" movement that emerged in the last few years. Abend's intervention in this book is both theoretical and meta-methodological, and his contribution is both empirical and substantive. At the level of theory, Abend provides a stimulating and, at most points, convincing argument

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for the substantive importance of a new object of social-scientific inquiry that he refers to, not surprisingly, as *the moral*

background. At the level of meta-methodology, Abend argues, also convincingly, that the “new science of morality” would be summarily impoverished if it were to remain trapped within the confines of individual moral judgment and the methodological tools designed to tap these judgments.

Substantively, Abend provides a demonstration of how sociologists may go about coaxing this new object into shedding light onto otherwise empirically puzzling phenomena, such as why actors may be found to be (sometimes astoundingly) repetitive at the level of explicit moral claims, while justifying these claims using wildly incompatible (“incommensurable” in the Kuhnian sense) presuppositions, procedures, lines of reasoning, and even metaphysical assumptions. Abend’s empirical case is the discursive field of American “business ethics” roughly covering the eighty-year period from the middle of the nineteenth century to the years immediately preceding the Great Depression. Abend takes a catholic approach to the definition of business ethics so that the term comes to include all individuals and organizational actors who engage in the production and dissemination of moral discourse regarding the bases of proper (and improper) conduct of business practice.

I believe the book is largely successful, both as an agenda-setting theoretical statement and as an empirical contribution to the history of American business ethics. The book is less successful (but only because of its ambition) when it comes to providing a clear meta-methodological statement of how exactly the approach “plays” with alternative interdisciplinary approaches that see themselves as charged with the study of moral phenomena and with cognate efforts within sociology to study both morality and similar “collective objects” in other domains (e.g., knowledge, beauty). The tensions remaining in the meta-methodological argument resolve themselves into ambiguity (and sometimes outright silence) at the level of plain old (first-order?) methodological claims. These ambiguities call into question the inferential validity of some of Abend’s substantive statements (such as whether there existed two and only two broad “forms” of business-ethical argumentation during the period and how exactly

Abend finds this out) but are not sufficient to threaten the overall contours or blunt the appeal of the project as a whole.

In this essay, I will focus primarily on Abend’s overall theoretical and meta-methodological project. This is for three reasons. First, this is the level at which Abend makes some of the most ambitious and (for that reason) controversial claims and therefore on which the long-term potential for this book to be part of the intellectual conversation depends (it is also the level that is closest to my expertise and interest). Second, I believe that the validity of Abend’s more narrowly empirical questions, such as the pervasiveness and recurring cycles of public concern with business ethics during the historical period in question, the rather old provenance of discursive concern with the ethics of business, and the emergence of elite business schools primarily around projects of moral reform of business practice, are convincingly demonstrated (to the extent that my limited expertise in the subject allows me to ascertain). Finally, the utility and validity of Abend’s more “theory-laden” empirical claims, such as whether what he refers to as the “Christian Merchant” and “Standards of Practice” approaches represent two distinct ideal-typical variants of moral background supporting, enabling, and facilitating particular types of public discourse around the ethics of business practice in the United States during the period in question, depend on the reader buying into the notion of moral background in the first place and being convinced that the notion designates a novel and unique object of study, one that is liable to be examined with the historical and textual approaches implicitly endorsed in the book.

In this respect, it is important to note that Abend’s theoretical intervention does not simply resolve itself into the announcement of a new object of study, but makes (sometimes fully articulated and well-reasoned, sometimes less so) assumptions about the nature of morality itself as well as the sorts of arguments that sociologists may help themselves to in order to find things out (or even to say meaningful things) about this object. It is at these points that some cracks begin to show in Abend’s overall argument. I will begin by laying out the

basics of Abend's proposal for the study of the moral background. I will then return to more controversial issues at the level of "moral ontology," naturalism, and meta-methodology that Abend only begins to allude to but which ultimately he self-consciously decides not to pursue fully or defers for future discussion.

Abend's key argument is that when it comes to dealing with concrete empirical materials (what could more prosaically be called "data"), the scientist of morality is actually confronted with two ontologically and practically distinct types of phenomena. On the one hand, we have what Abend refers to as *first-order morality*, which is constituted by the sum total of moral claims and behaviors related to a specific practical domain characteristic of a given collectivity at a particular time. Abend argues that many naturalistic, ethnographic, survey-based, social psychological, and/or individualistic approaches to morality (e.g., those characteristic of the "new science" of morality in neuroscience, moral psychology, and—in his view—most of sociology so far) reduce the empirical domain of morality to the study of the specific content and determinants of first-order moral claims and behavior.

While Abend does not disregard the value of scientific inquiry into first-order morality, he argues (convincingly) that ultimately the science of morality is incomplete unless it also pays attention to what he refers to as *second-order morality*. To simplify what is undoubtedly a much subtler argument, second-order morality stands to first-order morality as Kantian (categorical) form does to (experienced) content—except that the categorical form in question does not lie in a non-empirical (transcendental) realm only amenable to conceptual analysis; nor does it manifest itself as a purely individual phenomenon at the level of mind and experience. Instead, second-order morality is primarily found, in empirically accessible ways, as sets of collective and historical forms that (like first-order morality) exhibit variation across both time and place (in this sense, the moral background is a concept with a very good post-Kantian—e.g., Hegelian—pedigree).

For Abend, second-order morality is composed of the sum total of presuppositions,

premises, metaphysical commitments, and (lay or expert) "theories" about the underlying nature of the human, social, and natural worlds that undergird, support, and enable the articulation of specific first-order moral claims. As such, second-order morality includes those presuppositions that make possible the inclusion (or exclusion) of certain entities as belonging to the moral domain in the first place, the categorization of a given overt act or internal motive as moral or immoral, or the characterization of a given project as serving the collective good or contributing to societal decay. In addition, second-order morality underlies prescriptions governing the way that moral questions are asked, as well as the procedures by which we may go about coming up with answers to those very same (and sometimes vexing) moral questions.

This characterization should give the reader a sense of the type of object the "moral background" is. A distinction (well established in the Durkheimian tradition) taken from the sociology of collective memory between "collected memories" as an aggregate of individual memories and "collective memory" as shared *frameworks* for remembering at the collective level is useful to fix the intuition. Accordingly, the moral background is the shared underlying collective framework that supports specific acts of moral judgment, discourse, reasoning, and behavior in a given time and place. Like collective framework theorists in the sociology of memory, Abend's basic argument in *The Moral Background* is that the sociology of morality in particular and the new interdisciplinary science of morality in general should go beyond cataloging individual acts of moral judgment and begin to delineate, describe, and take into account the causal effects of the underlying presuppositional frameworks that make particular acts of first-order motives, judgment, and behavior matters of morality.

To develop the notion of moral background, Abend draws on a variety of philosophical sources, including influences of "continental" (Heidegger), "analytical" (Searle), and "mixed" (Taylor) provenance. In this respect, it is clear that the moral background, as its names implies, belongs to a family of notions (along with presupposition,

paradigm, collective representation, *episteme*, and others) that have been referred to by such analysts as Stephen Turner as “collective objects.” It is also clear that by postulating this new type of collective object, Abend aims to do for the sociology of morality what classical accounts in both the collective epistemology and critical social theory tradition have done for the status of knowledge claims. Abend’s notion of the moral background is a bit more supple than previous attempts to define collective objects, which have tended to narrow these down to a single set of elements (e.g., categorical, or cognitive). Instead, Abend’s “six facets” of the moral background (although the reason why only six are provided does not seem principled) actually include shared elements belonging to the category of “collective forms” (such as abstract theories, meta-ethical principles, and moral procedures) and “collected contents” (such as stores of moral concepts and categories).

However, it is important to note that analytical recourse to notions like the moral background (or second-order morality) is not undertaken in isolation from other theoretical and metatheoretical commitments, nor is it completely devoid of problems. Instead, we know from the history of allied efforts that theoretical recourse to these type of “second-order” collective objects for sociological explanation does bring up a set of analytical issues that theorists who have postulated similar “shared background” objects in other domains have faced in the past (not very successfully). This includes issues of socio-historical genesis and of the synchronic structure of the cultural transmission mechanisms through which elements of the moral background come to be shared and acquire their “background” (second-order) status. The detailed treatment of any of these is beyond the scope of Abend’s discussion, but users of the notion of the “moral background” must be aware of them and handle with care, as the history of the sociology of knowledge, collective epistemology, and critical theory is littered with ultimately unworkable postulations of collective objects that cannot pass empirical muster due to their reliance on impossible-to-adjudicate quasi-transcendental arguments to justify both their existence and their presumed empirical

efficacy and reliance on question-begging arguments to justify their shared status.

One appeal of Abend’s approach lies precisely in the care that he takes to stay away from the worst excesses of this tradition. Yet, at key points in his exposition Abend does resort to argumentative devices that clash with some of his more “pragmatist” appeals to the always provisional, ontologically non-mysterious status of the moral background as a plain old empirical object among others (i.e., accessible to the usual social-scientific methods of inquiry) and as such not necessarily requiring a special set of approaches and methods that go beyond empirical observation. For instance, Abend is never quite clear as to what he ultimately is getting at by saying that first-order morality “depends” on second-order elements, vacillating between non-naturalistic (i.e., transcendental) and ontological interpretations of the proposed dependence and enabling relations. At other times, we see Abend coming close to quasi-dualistic talk, separating “material” and “behavioral” happenings in the “biological” or “psychological” world from the “social presuppositions” that give these spatio-temporal events social and cultural intelligibility as moral happenings. This is an old strategy of argumentation taken from a tradition in the philosophical analysis of “action concepts” and “mentalistic” talk, which leads straight to an (unworkable in my view) anti-naturalist position.

For instance, after Abend is done with a fairly effective (but ultimately somewhat inconclusive) critique of current approaches to moral science that emphasize the neural, biological, and evolutionary underpinnings of (first-order) moral judgments (and, to a lesser extent, moral action), the compatibility of the notion of the moral background with a *naturalist* approach to moral phenomena remains up in the air. At some points Abend gives fairly strong indications that while first-order moral claims may be susceptible to a naturalist strategy, second-order morality may not be a (completely) natural object located at the same observational or even theoretical level. These are thorny epistemological and ontological issues that are not quite resolved in the book and that Abend wisely skirts around for more pragmatic (and workable) aims.

This leads to a final observation. Oddly enough, while the book is rich in *meta*-methodological arguments (what, turning Abend against Abend, we may refer to as “second-order methodological questions”), especially those having to do with the first-versus second-order contrast, as well as the relation between this distinction and analytical efforts in the study of morality outside of sociology, Abend is oddly silent when it comes to first-order methodological arguments related to the social scientific study of second-order morality within the discipline. The reader emerges from the book with the impression that Abend has no particularly strong methodological commitments in this respect and that he subscribes to an unstructured eclecticism in regards to social scientific method. But this is both unlikely and illogical. First, most of the substantive empirical claims in the book itself are established using a fairly consistent strategy of historical/interpretive analysis. Second, given the theoretical nature of the moral background as described (primarily composed of collective presuppositions), it stands to reason that it is also more likely to yield to methodological approaches calibrated to deal with these types of “thick” phenomena and to be resistant to those approaches attuned to capturing the “thin” veneer of first-order moral claims.

In this last respect, it is surprising how much the ghost of Clifford Geertz hangs over the entire project (and not just in the thin/thick contrast) but is never directly exorcised. To take one instance, many of the meta-methodological and anti-naturalistic elements of Abend’s argument have a lot in common with the famous “eye-wink” example in Geertz’s (1973) classic essay on thick description that has a common root in the mid-twentieth-century philosophy of action tradition alluded to above (and clearly definitive in the intellectual formation of some of Abend’s sources such as Taylor [1989]). In this respect, it seems like Abend may have missed an opportunity to connect his meta-methodological line of argumentation not only to a more coherent set of practical methodological concerns (remaining always an implicit interpretivist) but also to connect this work to similar efforts on the nature of sociological

explanation more generally (as in the recent work of Isaac Reed).

In all, *The Moral Background* is the most incisive and theoretically sophisticated entry into the “new sociology of morality” movement that has consolidated in recent years. Every serious analyst of morality in sociology will have to grapple with the first/second-order morality distinction and attempt to develop their own methodological strategies for teasing these two dimensions of moral phenomena apart. All analysts will also have to clarify their theoretical language in order to specify when they are referring to one or the other (or both). More broadly, Abend joins a group of scholars who are beginning to specify the center of moral action in sociology not on specific contents, but on some *formal* set of practices and procedures that make possible the specificity of moral judgment and classification in the first place (here I am thinking of Tavory’s [2011] recently articulated “formalist” argument).

While recourse to this type of quasi-transcendental argumentation does not come without costs (as noted above), I believe that the questions and problems that this orientation raises, while thorny, are worth the price of admission and may move theoretical reflection and empirical work on moral phenomena to a new level. This effort may also serve to push the sociology of morality away from purely internal reflection on the (spuriously) “unique” status of its object and toward a more concerted engagement with analogical issues and problems in both the sociology of knowledge and the resurgent sociology of aesthetics, subdisciplines that also grapple with allied distinctions between the first- and second-order character of some of their core phenomena.

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