

# The Mormon Review



Books and culture from an LDS perspective

## Recovering Truth: A Review of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 2<sup>nd</sup>, revised ed*, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 584 pages; subject index, author index.

By James E. Faulconer

A German philosophy book written under the influence of Heidegger. In fact, a long German philosophy book written under the influence of Heidegger. The result has the difficulties attendant on German philosophy (page after page of long sentences, learned references to works that almost no English speaker has read) as well as those attendant on Heidegger's influence (page after page of abstruse thought, invented vocabulary). Nevertheless, every scholar in the human sciences (the arts, the humanities, philosophy, history, the social sciences)

should take the time and energy to read the book. Perhaps those in the natural sciences should also read it. Why? Because it gives us an alternative theory of understanding that offers to take the place of the theories of knowledge on which we have come too heavily to rely. Those theories have made aesthetics into "mere aesthetics," mere expression of feeling rather than claims of truth. They have made morality into a matter of deciding right and wrong (often relative only to the feelings of some human group), but an endeavor in which the question of truth is irrelevant. And they have made practical questions into decisions about efficiency irrespective of truth. Modern epistemology has robbed the humanities and social sciences of truth; Gadamer's hermeneutics gives it back again.

Natural science is the model for modern epistemology: That which

the sciences know is that which is truly known. The natural sciences necessarily rely on method: they reduce

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the objects of their investigation to what is constant and measurable in those objects, they use theories and empirical rules to order their objects into sets of observations, and they test their observations with methods that guarantee them (relatively) invariable outcomes. Obviously the human sciences have no comparable method, and in light of the importance of natural science in our culture, the absence of such a method with its outcomes and their certainty has resulted in the aforementioned claims. If natural science is the model for knowledge, then our response to art is nothing but subjective feeling. If we agree that the natural sciences are the ideal model for all human knowledge, then such results are unavoidable. But Gadamer saves the human sciences from that inevitability.

So how does Gadamer perform this rescue of art, philosophy, history, praxis, and human self-understanding? By reminding us that we have long had, but forgotten, a different model, a model that does not rely on method, a model of understanding found in the arts and the interpretation

of texts rather than in the knowledge of abstract objects. Gadamer's argument is that the human sciences are interpretive sciences. Just as a musical score must be interpreted / enacted by the performer and a play has to be interpreted / enacted by the actors, a text (including a social text) must be interpreted / enacted by its readers. The reader doesn't report what the text invariably says each and every time it is read, something that could be methodologically verified. There is no such "thing" to be reported; that is not how we know the truth of a text. Rather, the reader produces what the text says, its truth, by reading it and making sense of it. It is tautologically true that without readers texts say nothing, and Gadamer reminds us of that tautology. It follows that we know the truth of a text only through what happens when we read it, where reading is a matter of enactment.

To say that I understand something is to say that I can make sense of it in my situation. One could say that I can "translate" it into that which I understand. I cannot do so arbitrarily or I

am not translating any more than the musical artist or the actor can make just anything out of the score or the script and still be playing this particular music or acting in that particular play. Likewise, I may feel something with regard to what I translate, but that feeling is not the same as my understanding, nor does it give rise to my understanding. The good reader uses the "score" of the text to produce a reading that others can hear, appreciate, or argue with. The text / score stands as an arbiter of our interpretations, but the truth of the score exists only in our productions of it. Without the production by a reader, the text says nothing at all. What do the musician, the actor, the translator, and the reader produce from their texts? The truth of those texts, a truth that is not objective, but is also not merely subjective since we can make informed judgments about good, better, and best. Truth is central to interpretation and, Gadamer argues, legal and homiletic interpretation give us models that have the question of truth at their heart.

According to Gadamer, if we look to the law and

preaching for our models of understanding, we will discover that they are always embedded in a tradition and history that go beyond that of which we are conscious, and we will see that the enactment or production of a text necessarily depends on tradition. But tradition doesn't mean "doing the same thing that has always been done." It means having a body of understanding and practice on which one can draw in coming to an understanding and into which one intends to fit the interpretation that shows that understanding. To interpret within the tradition is to continue it and to make it anew. It is to place oneself in relation to the tradition by remaking the tradition. It is to allow the possibilities inherent in the tradition to show themselves through the interpretation and, thereby, to create new possibilities.

The common law judge must take account of previous judgments. He need not conform to those previous decisions in some lock-step fashion, but he must be able to give an account of how his decision fits with those that were previously rendered, even if his decision is at odds with some previous decisions.

Even if his decision overturns the previous decisions. His judgment must also take his audience into account, not only those on whom he renders judgment, but the public at large and future judges facing similar cases. But none of that prevents him from ruling decisively and in a way that continues the flow of tradition. Indeed, such judgments are the essence of that continued flow.

Likewise, a good preacher can give her sermon only if she knows not only the verses of scripture for the sermon, but also the ways in which others have understood those verses, the way the church has used them, how they have been important to the ecclesial tradition, and so on. And the preacher must know the audience: what they know, what they need to know, what kinds of people they are, how they will hear what she says, .... The truth of the text appears in preaching that takes these things into account, and it doesn't appear to the degree that they are ignored.

Also at play in every interpretation are our prejudices, a word that Gadamer uses quite literally: pre-judgments rather than

"unfounded judgments." Those prejudgments are substantially formed, consciously or unconsciously, by the tradition in which we find ourselves. They may, unbeknownst to us, influence our understanding. Or we can use reason to question them and reject or refine them and, in the process, create new prejudgments. What we cannot do is avoid them, and we ought not to seek to do so since it is only by means of them that we can make our interpretations—and it is only by making interpretations that we discover some of our prejudgments, making it possible for us to make decisions concerning them.

Gadamer asks us to understand that pronouncing legal judgments or preaching sermons in the context of one's tradition is a matter of application (not that interpretation is the same as application, but that one does not occur without the other). The judge applies the ruling to those against whom the case was brought; the preacher applies the verses of the homily to the members of the congregation. But when Gadamer speaks of application, he isn't talking

only about consciously applying a principle to a case at hand. That would too narrowly construe what application means. A reader who applies the text applies the meaning to herself, understands what it means to her—and by extension to others as well. But when done well that is not a merely subjective judgment, any more than the judge's application of the common law to the defendant is a merely subjective judgment.

As these elements of interpretation (historical context or tradition, prejudice or pre-judgment, and application) show, full human understanding is unavoidably temporal. Full human understanding and the truth of that understanding is historical in character. In contrast, natural science must remove history from consideration to do its work. It must abstract from the historical world. That is a criticism of neither natural science nor its methods, but it means that natural science is an abstraction from full human understanding rather than the model of that understanding. It means that there are truths, historically situated and determined ones, that natural science is ill-equipped to deal with.

Humanists in general should read Truth and Method, but even non-humanist Mormons with an interest in things scholarly or intellectual should. We should consider Gadamer's thinking about understanding because as a group we are as much under the sway of scientism as anyone. One result is the sometimes pseudo-scientific way we talk about such things as faith, conversion, and covenant. Another, the mirror image of the first, is the tragic rejection of faith, conversion, or covenant because they turn out not to be amenable to scientific method. Both those relations of people to their faith explicitly but mistakenly take natural science as the fundamental model for human understanding. Gadamer gives us a philosophical alternative to that mistake.

A third result of our scientism is the too-often shallow way that we understand scripture and prophecy, thinking of them as a poorly-written or at least cryptic manuals of instruction, seldom finding in them the depth of knowledge that is possible and that would enrich our faith. We look for a method for interpreting scripture when we should be asking

how to enact its truth. Gadamer helps us see that we have long had better ways of reading scripture.

The person who has done the most thinking about how a Gadamerian understanding of truth applies to scripture reading is Paul Ricoeur in, for example, *Figuring the Sacred* or "The Self in the Mirror of Scripture" (in John McCarthy, ed., *The Whole and Divided Self*). And Ricoeur has written thoughtful responses to scripture in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, with André LaCoque. Most of the essays in the various seminars of the Mormon Theology Seminar (<http://www.mormontheologyseminar.org/>) are excellent examples of Latter-day Saints thinking about scripture in ways that are coherent with Gadamer's understanding of truth and understanding, which is not to say that the participants are consciously exemplifying that connection.

By providing an antidote to modernism's insistence that natural science is the model for all real knowledge, showing an alternative way of understanding knowledge that doesn't throw scientific

knowledge out with the alternative bathwater, Gadamer opens the possibility for Mormons to understand the Latter-day Saint movement more genuinely as a restoration rather than merely a peculiar instantiation of modern self-consciousness.

**Richard Bushman:**

My question is why call Gadamer's way of reading an approach to truth? Gadamer has systematically explored what happens when we read texts closely, but he offers no more hope of bringing us to a consensus of meaning that we can call truth than the other hermeneutics we employ in humanistic studies. Every tradition will read the texts differently and even readers within a tradition will disagree. Why call this truth?

As it is presented here, Gadamer's method seems mainly to give us courage to repel scientism. It codifies and lends dignity to what humanists do. That is a worthy project indeed, but applying the word truth to the outcome implies that humanistic readings should command the same authority as scientific conclusions do. I doubt that will happen.

**Response to Richard:**

Gadamer isn't presenting a theory of reading, but a theory of truth in the human sciences. That requires that we revise our understanding of truth and its relation to reason, objectivity, and so on. He begins doing that by criticizing the history of philosophy, particularly Kant and the Romantics. His argument is that in response to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century rationalists' exclusion of art from the realm of knowledge, Kant and the Romantics reasserted the importance of art, but they did so in a way that, in spite of their intentions, ultimately devalued it. They said that art puts us in touch with some higher reality. Unfortunately, that turned out to mean that aesthetic understanding lost all content and determinacy. Instead of understanding art in terms of content (truth), Kant and the Romantics took it to be a matter of subjective consciousness. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that became the most common understanding of aesthetic meaning and it remains the most common understanding today: the content of art is a matter of *merely* subjective

consciousness, a matter of individual preference.

Gadamer's alternative (which depends explicitly and heavily on Heidegger's thought, as well as, less obviously, the work of Wilhelm Dilthey) is to argue that the understanding of art is always a matter of historical understanding. The truth of art is historical, and as historical it is also a matter of self-understanding, a coming-to-know that is not the result of objective method and the certainty it produces:

Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it. (83)

Self-understanding has public, shareable content. It has truth. The performer does something that others can see, understand, discuss, and judge. But that truth cannot be reduced to any

constant or objectively measurable principle or set of characteristics. Descartes' "I think therefore I am" is not a moment of self-understanding, and the certainty for which Cartesian thought searches has nothing to do with self-understanding. (As Jean-Luc Marion points out in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Descartes explicitly omits love from the list of things that characterize the ego, though surely love is essential to self-understanding. For more on the absence of self-understanding in the Cartesian *cogito*, see Ricoeur's *The Course of Recognition*.) The search for objective certainty that follows from the Cartesian foundation is irrelevant to areas of human endeavor, such as art or history, where self-understanding is the goal. Looking for certainty, or something like it, in the human sciences is a category mistake.

Subjectivity doesn't follow from the fact that the truth of the human sciences is found in self-understanding rather than certainty. One cannot ignore the temporal / historical dimension of the content of self-understanding, though one must ignore that dimension

of objective (natural science) understanding. There is truth in both arenas, but they are not the same kinds of truth, so it is a mistake to try to understand matters in one of those arenas using the standards for truth of the other, though that is what we have most often done, using the standards for truth in science to judge the truth claims of art and the other human sciences, such as history.

That means that the answer to whether Gadamer's theory gives us a method for deciding with certainty between the claims of different traditions is emphatically, no. In fact, the demand for such a method is an instance of the very thing he is arguing against. It is a demand that takes objective science as its model of understanding. But Gadamer's theory does not preclude us from deciding between traditions: different traditions are not cut off from each other. Does this historicism mean that we are reduced to sheer relativity? No (first) because for the most part we stand within the same broad tradition. There is more overlap between most of our traditions, if we are North Americans or Western Europeans, for

example, than there is difference. Because we are human beings there is considerable overlap between any two traditions. And no (second) because languages and therefore traditions are translatable. That I can understand Korean means that it is in principle possible for me to "fuse" my historic-temporal horizon with a Korean one. (See Gadamer's discussion on pages 303-306.) We can understand other traditions, and if we can, we can judge them. In fact, we cannot avoid doing so. Our judgments will have the status of temporal knowledge—real knowledge, knowledge of truth—but not the status of objective certainty, another kind of truth, abstract—abstracted—truth.

Should humanistic readings command the same authority as scientific conclusions? Yes and no. Since they concern the ground of what make natural scientific conclusions possible (they take account of the material from which natural science makes its abstractions), they should command more rather than the same or less authority. But the authority they claim is the authority of self-understanding rather than the authority of

objective certainty. They should claim authority only in the realm to which they are relevant, which is not the realm of the natural sciences but *is* the realm of human existence.

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