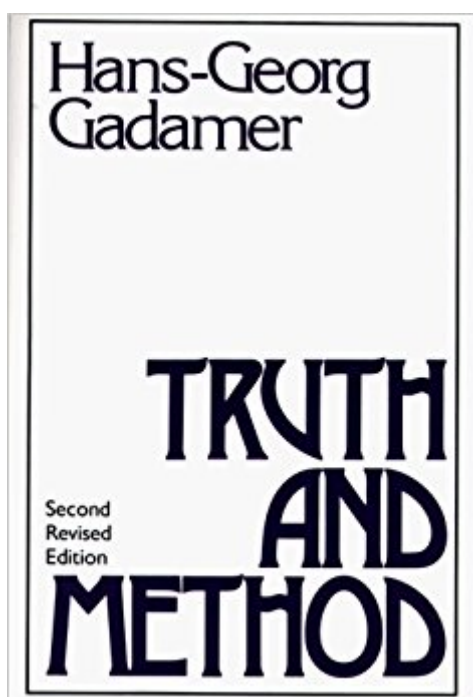


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Truth And Method



Synopsis

Written in the 1960s, TRUTH AND METHOD is Gadamer's magnum opus. Looking behind the self-consciousness of science, he discusses the tense relationship between truth and methodology. In examining the different experiences of truth, he aims to "present the hermeneutic phenomenon in its fullest extent.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is one of my favorite books of all time. It is Gadamer's masterpiece - published when he was sixty years old, and the result of a life time of scholarship. T&M is a critique of romantic hermeneutics -a doctrine that holds that the meaning of a text is identical with the intention of its author. On this account, the purpose of interpretation is to reconstruct the author's intention, the experience they had while writing it that is held in the text. To this Gadamer contrasts his own theory of historically effected consciousness. Gadamer claims that 'understanding a text' involves understanding the tradition of which it (and you) are a part. In the course of doing so, Heidegger ranges over the history of aesthetic theory, phenomenology, and hermenutics, biblical interpretation, as well as examining the nature of all human understanding. Gadamer is a student of Heidegger. In this book he is interested in demonstrating the way a Heideggerian account of consciousness (and being in the world) can help us make sense of the act of interpretation. He is also interested in demonstrating that one can use Heidegger without being a Nazi or obsessed with anxiety and being-towards-death. This book is highly technical, the prose is difficult, and demanding (it helps to have read Being and Time, Kant's Critique of Judgement, some Augustine and Aquinas, etc etc

etc.). For people who can get into the work, however, it promises a comprehensive theory of human being, the history of philosophy (and indeed, western thought as a whole) and a holistic worldview of unmatched depth and detail. And that's no small potatoes. For those interested in reading Gadamer but not ready to tackle T&M, I recommend some of the shorter volumes of his speeches and writings. One of these, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics', is (relatively) accessible and generally considered by Gadamerphiles to be 'Truth and Method Lite'.

First, Truth and Method is a true classic. Basically, it sees Gadamer revitalise 'nonscientific' truth, i.e. the experience of truth inaccessible to method and irreducible to bare statement. The book itself does have a structure/setting that makes it difficult to get into initially (it is usefully read in tandem with a good commentary eg. Joel Weinsheimer's 'Gadamer's Hermeneutics'), but it is simply worth the effort. Second, the review below is mistaken when it attributes to Gadamer the idea that the Old Testament should be read literally. Gadamer refers to Luther's position that "the Scripture has a univocal sense that can be derived from the text", but he does this as part of an historical overview of hermeneutics and, on the very next page, Luther gets refuted by 18thC historicism. Gadamer moves beyond both these positions to reveal how 'literalism' (and - more pressingly - 'historicism') is a projection of unproductive prejudices. It is an "obstruction", that gets in the way of the truth Gadamer seeks. Also, while T&M is relevant to theology, it should be made clear that Gadamer is writing of a philosophical-universal hermeneutics and not something regional.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method is a result of sixty years of reflection on the nature of the hermeneutic experience and an exemplary document of lucid and fascinating scholarship. The purpose of the treatise on understanding is 'what takes place above our thinking and doing', in other words, the constitutive events in art, literature and ethics. As Gadamer's examination of the romantic human sciences, or Geisteswissenschaften, is constantly referred back onto the tradition and the sources from which it emerges and supports itself, some background knowledge is required, particularly of classical philosophy, Hegel and Heidegger. The project of Truth and Method opens by engaging the reader to a critique of Kantian aesthetic exposition, and uses it as a starting-point for an examination of hermeneutics, the art of understanding. In the course of the examination Gadamer does not, however, engage in a dialogue only with the philosophical tradition, but by continuously exploring the universality of the hermeneutic experience demonstrates its relevance and presence in history, study of languages, legal theory and theology. For a reader coming from the analytic-linguistic tradition, the final section on the hermeneutic character of language should be

of particular interest. In it Gadamer outlines his conception of language as the horizon through which the experience of the world is understood. But as throughout the book, the horizon of understanding is not determined solely on the basis of the grammatical or the logical structure present; indeed, the horizon itself is a constant possibility for the historically effected consciousness to gain further self-knowledge through its experience in language as a historically and temporally defined phenomenon. The style of the book is thoroughly lively and engaging; despite the abstract subject-matter the argument is never lost from sight and Gadamer's sense of clarity in terms of expression makes the book a pleasure to read and come back to. I recommend this book whole-heartedly, not as a conclusive and total life-philosophy, but as an exploration and fascination of the possibilities of human potential in its recurring activity of living and perpetuating, its own culture, tradition and being.

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