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## **The Inevitability of Epistemology in Historiography: Theory, History, and Zombie Mormon History**

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# THE INEVITABILITY OF EPISTEMOLOGY IN HISTORIOGRAPHY: THEORY, HISTORY, AND ZOMBIE MORMON HISTORY

*Alan Goff*

*Abstract: Fundamental changes have occurred in the historical profession over the past thirty years. The central revolutionary change is that workers in the historical profession can no longer ignore theory and philosophy of history. A built-in resistance to theory causes historians to abjure philosophical analysis of their discipline at a time when such analysis is recognized to be indispensable. If one doesn't have an explicit theory, one will appropriate one uncritically, without the felt need to articulate and defend the theory. The dominant theory in history over the past century has been positivism, a conception of disciplinary work that ruled history and the social sciences during the twentieth century but has been stripped of rhetorical and persuasive power over the past three decades. Although positivism has been overwhelmingly rejected by theoretically informed historians, it continues to dominate among the vast majority of historians, who fear adulterating history with philosophical examination. The most common version of positivism among historians is the assertion that the only evidence from the past that is valid is testimony based on empirical observation. This essay focuses on recent comments by Dan Vogel and Christopher Smith, who deny this dominance of positivism in the historical profession, and in Mormon history in particular, by misunderstanding positivism without even consulting the large scholarly literature on the topic that rebuts their assertions. They make no attempt to engage the sophisticated literature on the transformation in historiography and philosophy of history that has made most of history written*

*to standards of the 1970s obsolete and revealed it as ideologically inspired; while at the same time these historical researchers assert their own objectivity by appealing to a conventional wisdom that is now antiquated. This version of positivism is especially hostile to religious belief in general, and in particular to that embodied in the LDS tradition.*

The problem with hidden epistemologies is that they can mislead practitioners into believing that “common sense” (for which we should read “the currently prevailing idea of naïve empiricism”) or personal empathic insight or rhetorical persuasiveness are the only possible arbiters of interpretation and explanation. In that case the rational idea of “truth” is rejected in favor of pre-rational or irrational “understanding,” which cannot be shared widely. The rejection by many historians of any attempt by philosophers and methodologists to criticize their practices and arguments from some external methodological and historical point of view must arouse the suspicion that they do not wish to be confronted with the logical and explanatory implications of their own assumptions and presuppositions, and hence do not wish to have the strength of their own arguments and conclusions tested at all.<sup>1</sup>

Empiricism in its crudest form is probably the epistemology which is most generally accepted by people without philosophical training. It embodies the most common beliefs about successful science and scientists and is implicit in the images used in the media to depict them. Crude empiricism assumes

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1 Christopher Lloyd, *The Structures of History* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 4.

that the scientist is a sort of *spectator* of the object of inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

The principle is this: We are not primarily concerned in an historian with his philosophy but with his or her history. There is no doubt that bad philosophy must always make bad history.<sup>3</sup>

Of all the Japanese soldier holdouts who hid for decades after World War II on Pacific islands, not surrendering in a cause long lost, the best known was Hiroo Onoda, who after the Japanese defeat in 1945, held out for nearly thirty years. Onoda had explicit orders neither to commit suicide nor surrender. He and a few comrades went to the hills, occasionally attacking Filipino police and peasants. As early as October 1945 the Onoda group had read leaflets asserting the war was over, but they discounted the claim as Allied propaganda; their conceptual scheme didn't permit the idea that Japan had lost the war. Over the years, newspapers were left to the group and appeals were made over loudspeakers by relatives (authorities knew the names of the leftover soldiers because one of the group had given himself up), all to no avail. Orders from Japanese generals to surrender were dropped from airplanes. Onoda's comrades eventually surrendered or were killed by search parties or police, leaving Onoda as the last holdout. Onoda's long refusal to admit defeat ended when a Japanese adventurer, Norio Suzuki, set out to discover three things: Lieutenant Onoda, a panda, and the Abominable Snowman; he found the first item on that list in the Philippines and returned to Japan with news of the soldier and photos of the two together, although he could not

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2 Len Doyal and Roger Harris, *Empiricism, Explanation, and Rationality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 2.

3 Hillaire Belloc, *A Companion to Mr. Wells's "Outline of History"* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1926), 90.

persuade the soldier to turn himself in. In March 1974, Onoda's former commanding officer flew to the Philippines to order Onoda to end his long war.<sup>4</sup>

The academic study of history has undergone a revolution over the past thirty years,<sup>5</sup> a conceptual revolution that most historians are only vaguely aware of, and fear as a declaration of war on the traditional concept of history. A revolution almost completely unnoticed in Mormon historical studies (until the last decade, when younger, more sophisticated historians have been apprenticed into the profession), despite its enormous eventual impact in that area. The epistemological foundation of the discipline has been entirely overthrown during that period. Yet most who toil in the fields of Mormon history continue to act as though the status quo ante is still a viable epistemological position from which to advance their arguments. The upheaval has fundamentally uprooted the previous conceptual framework that guided historical research, but because the turn originated in the discipline's history of ideas, the lack of interest most historians share toward the philosophy of history, historiography, and intellectual history has left practitioners inadequately prepared to engage the changes. Peter Burke calls that conceptual adhesive that previously held the historical profession together "the Ranke paradigm," consisting of the following four interlocking ideas: (1) that "historical writing could and should be impartial and even objective," (2) that such research should be archivally based, (3) that historical method was based on the discovery of and critical analysis of sources, and (4) that the subject matter was politics (at least for Ranke).<sup>6</sup> Every intellectual framework both enables

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4 "Hiroo Onoda," *Wikipedia*, 11/8/12.

5 Michael Bentley, "Past and 'Presence': Revisiting Historical Ontology," *History and Theory* 45 (Oct. 2006): 349.

6 Peter Burke, "Paradigms Lost: From Göttingen to Berlin," *Common Knowledge* 14.2 (2008): 247.

possibilities and precludes others. Those who operate within the paradigm are blinded to the limits it places on what ideas and evidence will be considered rational or possible, because they equate their own parochial horizon with all of rationality and good research. What Burke calls the Rankean paradigm is also commonly called “scientific history,” or positivism;<sup>7</sup> and it became the dominant paradigm as historians professionalized their discipline.<sup>8</sup> This prevailing intellectual scheme has been confronted and its weaknesses exposed by the shift to theory in historiography. But since historians are trained to distrust theory,<sup>9</sup> they have reacted with puzzlement and outrage when their “foundational concepts such as ‘truth,’ ‘fact,’ and ‘objectivity’ have been exposed as at worst meaningless, and at best in need of radical redefinition.”<sup>10</sup>

Every historical account operates from within one or another intellectual framework that isn’t founded on objective, empirical, factual evidence but looks more like an ideology or a faith commitment; that is how we ought to think of positivism, as just another of the many churches within modernity. A parallel is contemporary Protestantism, where Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist (and the list could be expanded) traditions, within which the modernity of the pragmatist, positivist, romantic, historicist traditions leads each to claim to have the truth, while faulting opposing frameworks for not living up to the fidelity criteria of that particular sect. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright notes

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7 Burke, “Paradigms Lost,” 248.

8 Burke, “Paradigms Lost,” 249. Franklin says the thrust of that Rankean paradigm was positivistic as both history and the social sciences went through their professionalizing phases toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. V. P. Franklin, “Reflections on History, Education, and Social Theories,” *History of Education Quarterly* 51.2 (May 2011): 264.

9 Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 28.

10 Southgate, *Postmodernism in History*, 29.

that “when you abandon one framework of ideas you do not live thereafter in a wilderness, without any framework at all. You quickly substitute another, perhaps some philosophical scheme of thought. Likewise, those who ignore one community of discourse (say, the church) are inevitably loyal to another (perhaps some scholarly guild, or some drift of currently fashionable ideology).”<sup>11</sup> An example of reading from within some historical context that denies interpretations claiming to explain the past as it really happens is the difference between ancient and modern ways of reading a book such as the Bible.

According to James Kugel, despite some difference among themselves, ancient readers read the Bible using consistent assumptions: that (1) the Bible is basically cryptic, not always meaning what a plain reading would assert, (2) the book is more relevant to contemporary circumstances than to those of its origins (this is a fundamental denial of modern historicism, which asserts that the original meaning and context is the only one that really matters) as a series of moral lessons aimed at readers today to provide moral guidance, (3) the Bible is free of contradiction despite the variety of writers and compilers, and (4) the scripture is divine, in that God inspired the whole through prophetic intermediaries. Like all assumptions, ancient readers took these beliefs for granted rather than as conscious and explicit arguments.<sup>12</sup> Modern readers often consider these assumptions nonsensical, not because they have been disproved but because modern readers operate from a different set of assumptions that are no less commitments of faith, no less taken for granted.

Modern biblical criticism is built on a set of assumptions articulated by Spinoza, presuppositions that must be

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11 N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 136.

12 James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 14–16.



accepted as articles of faith in order to get the project going, faith commitments that as a group directly challenge the commitments of ancient biblical readers: (1) scripture must be understood on its own (no commentary or tradition, no typology or midrash), (2) scripture must be read historically, in its original context without later concepts or events superimposed on it, (3) scripture should be read literally unless it explicitly invites a metaphorical interpretation, (4) one must examine the text historically (its composition and transmission, its author's life, and the historical circumstances of its production) in order to understand the author's intention and meaning, and (5) the subsections of the book often contradict each other, and even within an individual book conflicting information emerges.<sup>13</sup> Because we are moderns, we have a natural tendency to prefer the modern textual assumptions against the ancient ones, because modernity is the culturally conditioned and ubiquitous environment around us, much like we rarely think about the air we breathe. This happens frequently, because we uncritically accept another of those modern assumptions—progress. We assume that whatever is latest is best, whatever is newest is superior. Thus, modern readings of the Bible have a built-in rhetorical and persuasive advantage because we are obliged to think through or past modern presuppositions in order to give the Bible a fair hearing.

In particular we (and not just biblical critics) are trained to return over and over to the same questions (not just about the Bible but about the Book of Mormon and many other texts from antiquity) phrased as the historicity of the text: is the text historically dependable? can we assent to its historical claims? Consider, for example, ancient assumption 3, that the Bible never contradicts itself nor does it engage in identical repetition. Repeated stories, then, through the repetition

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13 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 31–32.

make the old story new. “The Bible never repeats itself or says anything for emphasis, and when it seems to, there must be some additional, hidden meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore when modern readers take up typological figurations in the text, they dismiss the repeated stories as plagiarisms or derivative copying, and therefore nonhistorical. When in the book of Genesis we have three stories about a patriarch passing his wife off as his sister in a foreign land, we view the repeated stories as faults, imitations, piracies.

This exact approach is that used to denigrate the Book of Mormon. If the Mormon scripture has stories similar to those in the Bible, Joseph Smith must have plagiarized them. Fawn Brodie, Wayne Ham, and a host of other under-readers have made this assertion about the Book of Mormon, but more relevant here is Dan Vogel’s assertion that if Alma’s conversion story in the Book of Mormon is similar to Paul’s in the New Testament, the only plausible explanation is that Smith pilfered the story: of the experience of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, “their conversion story is patterned after that of Paul in Acts 9:1-31.”<sup>15</sup> I think much more plausible is a reading I have not yet published which traces stories of prophetic callings like both Paul’s and Alma’s stories to stories used dozens of times in the New Testament, and many more times in the Old Testament (and in pseudepigraphal literature), which fit this pattern. In other words, Vogel, Brodie, Ham, and others see the pattern as a fault; I see it as a complication that makes us appreciate the book more. Finding patterns and repetitions in ancient writings is an indication of their antiquity, not their modernity. Vogel may not even be aware that he adheres to modern assumptions in reading the text, but both he and I approach the scripture with presuppositions that greatly bias both readings. Kugel

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14 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 124.

15 Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2004), 196.

notes that the point isn't to label the modern or the ancient approach as defective, scientific, fictional, or derivative; "what truly separates these two groups of interpreters is the set of unwritten instructions that guide them in reading the biblical text. Accept the one's, and the other's interpretations appear irrelevant at best, at worst a willful and foolish, hiding from the obvious. It is thanks to this crucial difference in assumptions that these two groups can read exactly the same words and perceive two quite different messages."<sup>16</sup> Modern readers tend to absolutize their own reading practices without realizing that they are operating with a system of assumptions and beliefs. We have to permit a challenge to modern ways of reading the past—reading through the assumptions of modernity often isn't the best way to read. "Disquieting as it may be, one is left with the conclusion that most of what makes the Bible *biblical* is not inherent in its texts, but emerges only when one reads them in a certain way, a way that came into full flower in the closing centuries BCE."<sup>17</sup> But as much as modern historians like to think of themselves as open minded, it is excruciatingly difficult to acquiesce to the possibility that your most valued fundamental assumptions might not be up to the explanatory task at hand and might need alteration or abandonment, and that the assumptions of antiquity account for the text better.

Biblical scholarship, as one form of the modern historical enterprise, has commonly asserted its own neutrality and objectivity, although it has never been either objective or neutral.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the context of the modern historian's interpretive framework requires historians to think differently about their work than has been standard for the past two hundred years. We can never have virgin readings of the past or a scripture free of ideology or philosophical assumptions.

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16 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 136.

17 Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 668.

18 Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 90.

Even the anti-intellectual believer depends on some form of scholarship (often from three or so generations earlier, when the pastor attended divinity school or the scholar apprenticed through graduate school). “Scholarship of some sort is always assumed; what the protest means, unfortunately, is that the speakers prefer the scholarship implicit in their early training, which is now simply taken for granted as common knowledge, to the bother of having to wake up mentally and think fresh thoughts. Again and again, such older scholarship, and such older traditions of reading, turn out to be flawed or in need of supplementing.”<sup>19</sup> The changes that have swept through history (and the other disciplines, including the historical subdiscipline of biblical studies) have transformed the historical profession, and one can’t merely go on assuming the state of the discipline as it was in the 1960s is its current state. History has to be examined historically, and the need for continual reassessment doesn’t stop once you finish graduate school.

The revolution isn’t limited to history but has occurred in all the disciplines—the humanities, the social sciences, even the “hard” sciences. The vehicle of these changes usually goes under the names of *theory* or *postmodernism*. Because the latter is driven by the former, I’ll refer to this transformation of ideas as the expansion of theory (philosophically oriented examination of foundational concerns) into historiography (although the imperialistic impulse of theory was driven more by literary theorists than philosophers); an ineluctable philosophical foundation exists in all disciplines, which can be ignored only at great peril. This approach that challenges a now-faded view of how history ought to cause historians to be suspicious and resist theory, because “they have been seduced by attractive yet crude caricatures both of their own disciplinary identity, goals and practices as well as the identity, goals and

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19 Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 91–92.

practices of philosophers, theorists and literary critics.”<sup>20</sup> But it is impossible to move beyond theory and philosophy. One can generate history only from within one or another philosophy of history. Daddow refers to the “fraught relationship between philosophy and history”: as much as the historian desires to abandon philosophy, he or she can do so only by taking up another philosophical theory. Those who believe they have no philosophy of history are merely naïve and deluded about the philosophy they are committed to. That philosophy which claims to be free of philosophy we call *positivism* (historians often betray this theory-denial when they assert they don’t do metaphysics, leaving that to poets, philosophers, and theologians). In Mormon studies, as in religious studies more generally, “the scientistic-positivist ethos that is still virulent in religious and biblical studies is the main obstacle to a paradigm shift” to a more adequate theory of history.<sup>21</sup> This positivism dominates not just biblical and religious studies but all of traditional history.<sup>22</sup> Positivism is deployed in order to “avoid theoretical considerations and normative concepts” in an attempt to circumvent ideological commitments.<sup>23</sup> Neglect of theoretical concerns is probably the best theorists can hope for among the vast majority of historians. “Even the most celebrated historians of the twentieth century display little concern for the epistemological problems attending the writing of history, and sometimes attack those who even raise such issues for discussion.”<sup>24</sup> The avoidance of philosophical

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20 Oliver J. Daddow, “Still No Philosophy Please, We’re Historians,” *Rethinking History* 9.4 (Dec. 2005): 492.

21 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Changing Paradigms: The Ethos of Biblical Studies,” *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 33.

22 Fiorenza, “Changing Paradigms,” 34.

23 Fiorenza, “Changing Paradigms,” 42.

24 Elizabeth Ann Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2004), 84.

exploration was coupled in the historical profession with assertions of objectivity as the Rankean method developed to eschew “all theoretical reflection. Ranke became for many American scholars the prototype of the nontheoretical and the politically neutral historian.” This Rankean framework of objectivity and theory independence was the foundation of “the positivist nineteenth-century understanding of historiography as a science” that became the basis of biblical studies.<sup>25</sup>

The older view of good historical research (and political scientific, sociological, psychological, biblical critical, economic, and anthropological research) has been undermined to the point of debilitation by this wave of theory. Although this dated view has been declared dead by its opponents from its birth, it continued to rule for at least a century and a half until the 1980s, “yet for many it lives on, at least in an everyday commitment to science, a belief that reality can by and large be truthfully and systematically represented in reason” and the practical successes of science and technology. But the future looks dark indeed for this intellectual paradigm. “Empiricism, scientism, naturalism and progressivism—core strands of positivism—are nowadays hedged with doubts and qualifications”<sup>26</sup> to such an extent that the adherents of this, the ultimate of modernity’s projects, almost always disavow their patrimony. Despite its philosophical indefensibility, still this “theory of knowledge based on the tenets of positivism dominates academic scholarship,”<sup>27</sup> and not just the academy but our entire culture,<sup>28</sup> often without

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25 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 24–25.

26 Peter Halfpenny, “Positivism in the Twentieth Century,” *Handbook of Social Theory*, ed. George Ritzer and Barry Smart (London: Sage, 2001), 382.

27 Jennie Hornosty, “Academic Freedom in Social Context,” *Academic Freedom and the Inclusive University*, ed. Sharon E. Kahn and Dennis Pavlich (Vancouver: UBC, 2000), 42.

28 Fergus Kerr, “Logical Positivism,” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell,

those who adopt the positivistic stance even being aware of the influence.

In response to Peter Novick's book on the question of historiographical objectivity, Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. calls the study "an obituary for the historical profession of the 1980s in America." Turner insists that the obituary is premature, for although the profession adheres to the goals of Rankean methodology and historiography, "the obituary lacks, in short, a corpse."<sup>29</sup> Turner invents a strangely narrow definition of Rankean historiography as it was adopted by the American historical profession; but unlike those obituaries that are pre-written for the well known and celebrated, and occasionally are mistakenly released before the person dies (Coleridge, Hemingway, Bob Hope), the philosophical framework that supported the historical profession in the twentieth century can now be declared dead—your nose will help you track down the corpse.

Since those with a vested interest in asserting that the body isn't a carcass keep insisting that the intellectual corpus that animated American historiography during the twentieth century is merely suffering from a flesh wound, an issue that should have expired years ago and must be revisited again and again. The scent of putrefaction can easily be detected. During the twentieth century the historical profession was dominated by a particular approach to the writing of history. That theoretical paradigm emphasized an empirical method: a desire to free the researcher from bias, presupposition, and ideology; and a fetishization of the archive as the source of historical facts out of which an objective historical account can be rendered. Various known as *positivism* and *empiricism*

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1993), 348.

29 Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., "Symposium: History: As It Really Was?; Peter Novick and the 'Objectivity Question' in History," *Academic Questions* 8 (1995): 22–23.

*history*, it is also known by other names, such as *objectivism*, or *scientific history*, so we shouldn't be surprised if historians are still in thrall to this intellectual agenda. "The dominant *habitus mentalis* of modern Western societies has been 'positivism.'"<sup>30</sup> Academic culture has been ruled by a positivism that was only seriously challenged starting in the 1980s. Since then positivism has gone into precipitous decline as a theoretical position, but it was the prevailing way of justifying historical positions during the twentieth century, so most historians are reluctant to abandon it.

Criticisms of positivism emerged from philosophy, and as each discipline was theorized after the 1980s (that is, as philosophical explorations of the discipline's claims began to be required of practitioners, more historians and social scientists had to go back and bone up on contemporary continental and analytic philosophy), positivistic claims became more liability than advantage, but many disciplinary practitioners—especially in history—were reluctant to cut loose from the anchor that had held the profession firmly for a century. Development of a theory-based historiographical account was complicated by the fact that "the overwhelming majority of historians are utterly indifferent to issues involving epistemology and philosophy of history";<sup>31</sup> only a small fraction of historians are sufficiently philosophically sophisticated to engage in the argument. Doing theory became a necessity for historians, but there is nothing historians dislike more than being asked to do philosophy: "Professional historiography has presupposed the existence, although not necessarily the telling, of a vision of coherence has been largely invisible to historians

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30 Richard Harvey Brown, *Social Science as Civic Discourse: Essays on the Invention, Legitimization, and Uses of Social Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 9.

31 Michael Kammen, *Selvages & Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1987), 17.



themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Not only is positivism the predominant intellectual current in most academic disciplines, so it is in history also: “Today positivist historiography is considered the mainstream of History (at least in North America and Western Europe).”<sup>33</sup> The Rankean model of historical research became particularly entrenched in America. This idea cluster combined a professionalizing trend with a dread rejection of theoretical reflection, where “in the American historical profession, anti-theoretical and anti-philosophical objectivist empiricism had been the dominant stance”;<sup>34</sup> even today many historians

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32 Allan Megill, “‘Grand Narrative’ and the Discipline of History,” *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 153.

33 Gabrielle A. T. Durepos, *ANTI-history: Theorizing the Past, History and Historiography in Management and Organization Studies* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 65. See also Jonathan B. Isacoff, “Pragmatism, History, and International Relations,” *Pragmatism in International Relations*, ed. Harry Bauer and Elisabetta Brighi (New York: Routledge, 2009), 67. “Positivism has been the dominant Anglo-American approach to historiography and the social sciences.” Terry Eagleton has also asserted that “most historians are unwitting positivists,” in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (New York: Verso, 1995), 22. However, I ought to note that one can as easily find sources that assert the opposite—that most historians are against positivism; but it is the unwittingly positivistic historians who make the latter claim. Historians have a long tradition of being committed to a vulgar positivism, “but it is doubtful whether many academic historians (outside the Latin countries) knew that they were positivists.” E. J. Hobsbawm, “Karl Marx’s Contribution to Historiography,” *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory*, ed. Robin Blackburn (New York: Vintage, 1972), 266.

34 Beatriz Inés Moreyra, “History: Mutations, Crisis and Disciplinary Identity,” *An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Historiography: Professionalism, Methodologies, Writings*, ed. Rolf Torstendahl. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2000), 198–99. Oliver J. Daddow applies the name “the ideology of apathy” to this reluctance of historians to examine their own theoretical commitments in “Still No Philosophy Please, We’re Historians,” 419–20. This apathy about reading any source that would challenge the historian’s positivistic commitments is a choice, not something that happens by default. This reticence has a long history in historiography; and “when eminent historians eschew thorny philosophical problems simply because they are difficult to resolve, it hardly inspires faith in the intellectual foundations of the discipline and it hardly encourages their protégés to take seriously the philoso-

proudly proclaim their indifference to theoretical concerns, sometimes wearing the dismissal as a badge of honor. Elizabeth Clark and Jerzy Topolski agree that “historians generally assume their epistemological positions without reflection or argument.”<sup>35</sup> And Clark notes that “historians have been hard pressed in recent years to provide compelling responses when challenged by philosophers and theorists.”<sup>36</sup> We shouldn’t be taken aback if a strong reluctance exists to subject truth claims to philosophical analysis in the macrocosm of the historical profession; we would find an even stronger unwillingness to theorize in the microcosms of the discipline, such as in Mormon history. Dan Vogel is one such historical writer in Mormon studies who is completely ignorant of the literature that takes up positivism: the philosophical literature, the historiographical literature, the social scientific literature; he never cites references that are easily available and contradict his own definitions and views on the issues. He has an obligation to consult the references, because they so overwhelmingly refute his assertions; he instead attempts to muddle through by avoiding the topic, labeling it “esoteric and irrelevant.” If appealing to covert epistemological positions while denying the need to articulate them is unsatisfactory, most historians are either uninterested in or ill equipped to explore the nature of historical representations but prefer to “leave the philosophical struggles to the philosophers” and go about working with sources.<sup>37</sup> Historians have built their standing as a profession

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phy and theory of history.” Oliver J. Daddow, “Still No Philosophy Please, We’re Historians,” 432.

35 Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 205 n. 78.

36 Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 17.

37 Thomas Postlewait and Charolotte M. Canning, “Representing the Past: An Introduction on Five Themes,” *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, ed. Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010), 12. The same is true of teachers of history in Britain, most of whom “still regard philosophy of history (if they give it a thought) as an alien, even pretentious, activity, irrelevant to their practical concerns,” while they

on the objectivity ideology which asserts the historian's freedom from ideology by appealing to a "scientific objectivist method" that can be maintained "only by resisting incursions into the discipline by potentially damaging philosophical and epistemological debates can historians retain their reputations as credible purveyors of knowledge about the past which they have spent 150 years constructing."<sup>38</sup> Always, always it should be remembered that "the language and rhetoric of positivism is most often invoked (perhaps unconsciously) when ideology is most nakedly displayed."<sup>39</sup> The reader needs to appreciate the irony that ideology is never more manifest than when its advocates assert the absence of ideology.

Sol Cohen is a good case study, because he is representative of how the larger historical profession was disciplined "in the tenets of realist or positivist historiography" in graduate school.<sup>40</sup> Cohen is representative of how historians, at least in post-WWII university education, were trained to be positivists and reject theoretical examination of their discipline; he is still teaching at UCLA. He received his PhD in history from Columbia University in 1964 and another PhD from Teachers College (presumably in education), Columbia University in 1966. That means he finished his graduate education at the height of the positivistic paradigm in the American historical profession,

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transmit to their own pupils the simplified and "often unexamined" version of the historiography they were taught at university. P. J. Lee, "History Teaching and Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 22.4 (Dec. 1983): 19. This simplistic variety of historiography usually comprises an uncritical view of history that opposes the subjective to the objective, the relative to the certain, the probable to the absolute, and the biased to the unbiased; in other words, history teachers too often just pass on a naïve variety of objectivism. P. J. Lee, "History Teaching and Philosophy of History," 22.

38 Oliver J. Daddow, "Still No Philosophy Please, We're Historians," 494.

39 Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Gardens: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 21.

40 Sol Cohen, "An Essay in the Aid of Writing History: Fictions of Historiography," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23 (2004): 318.

at the same time the New History and the New Mormon History were emerging as the dominant forces in their areas of influence (the 1970s saw the ascendance of social history, and then shortly after that cultural history became dominant—but all these trends were founded on positivistic presuppositions of Rankean orthodoxy). This positivistic paradigm ruled history until its underlying philosophical foundations were attacked beginning in the 1970s and continues ascendant today but has been shorn of its philosophical taken-for-grantedness. So Cohen's trajectory has been from positivistic disciple to critic of the dominant view; and like most historians who walked that path, he travelled that trajectory largely on his own without graduate courses or mentors to help him work through the servitude to positivism, because the orthodoxy and institutions of the historical profession remained wedded to a positivistic empiricism (they still are, but with some cracks in that system); but the dominant ethos was taught to him without irony or reservation in his graduate training. Cohen's graduate school mentor at Columbia, Lawrence A. Cremin, was a microcosm of the discipline in that he "scorned theorizing or introspection about historiography" as "the previous generation eschewed open discussion of philosophy of history or any kind of meta-theoretical reflection about historical writing."<sup>41</sup> The positivistic generation of historians viewed concern with philosophical issues as debilitating to the historical task—"the philosopher's business, not the historian's."<sup>42</sup> But historians must operate under one or another philosophy of history. Doing without one is not an option. So like Vogel, "Cremin renounced philosophy of history only to submit to it unaware."<sup>43</sup> As Cremin trained his students to become history professors and history teachers, he tutored them in the conventional wisdom of the profession:

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41 Cohen, "An Essay in the Aid of Writing History," 319.

42 Cohen, "An Essay in the Aid of Writing History," 320.

43 Cohen, "An Essay in the Aid of Writing History," 320.

the documentary model of research, the fetish of the footnote, the notion that “subjectivity, ideology, presentism, or any other contaminant of historiographic scientism was to be suppressed.”<sup>44</sup> Foundational to all other concerns was the avoidance of any theoretical reflection that currently gives the impression of ignorance: “Cremin’s commitment to historiographic positivism and antipathy toward theoretical reflection about the nature of historical knowledge now seems a kind of willful philosophical naiveté.”<sup>45</sup> Cremin’s deliberate obliviousness to his own theoretical foundations and rhetorical stances reflected the entire discipline’s innocence of its own ideology and philosophy; “I am astonished at how unsophisticated, historiographically speaking, Cremin seems, that is to say, how historiographically unsophisticated we all were at the time.”<sup>46</sup> Cremin, and the discipline as a whole, was committed five decades ago to an uncritical positivism that still resonates in the profession today, although Cohen was fortunate to escape from an unchallenged version of positivism. Cremin is representative of the historians in this regard, and Vogel has adopted the prevailing prejudices of the profession against philosophical examination. “It is clear that there is still some reluctance among historians to acknowledge any relevance of theoretical concerns to their own practice,” wrote Beverley Southgate in 2012.<sup>47</sup> Dan Vogel is a contemporary case study of how traditional and conservative the pursuit of history is; the same claims are the unstated, but they are *the* assumed position that Vogel believes the entire profession endorses.

I have written several essays criticizing Vogel’s ventures into Mormon history as permeated by an uncritical positivistic

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44 Cohen, “An Essay in the Aid of Writing History,” 320.

45 Cohen, “An Essay in the Aid of Writing History,” 321.

46 Cohen, “An Essay in the Aid of Writing History,” 324.

47 Beverley Southgate, “‘Faddish Theories’ and Historical Practice,” *Annual Bulletin of Historical Literature* 96.1 (Dec. 2012): 16.

understanding. Vogel, frustrated at being called a positivist, has responded several times in online discussion groups, vociferously insisting that he isn't a positivist; his most recent foray into denial is posted on the Signature Books website.<sup>48</sup> The other critics Vogel responds to can take care of themselves, so I'll confine my comments to the last short portion of Vogel's piece in which he takes up my critiques.

Having demonstrated his theoretical lack of awareness in previous discussions when he has taken up the issue of his own philosophical commitments, Vogel begins his most recent sortie into the matter by attempting to change the subject away from his own epistemological position: "In his 2004 critique of *American Apocrypha*, Alan Goff failed to discuss the specifics of my essay—whether or not the three and eight witnesses viewed the plates subjectively and the possibility that they hallucinated—but instead attempted to derail the discussion with an esoteric and irrelevant discussion about epistemology, using a postmodern critique of knowledge as an apologetic against a position I did not take. Indeed, it is Goff's extreme anti-positivist stance and lack of familiarity with the sources and subject that cause him to distort my arguments."<sup>49</sup> Vogel may believe that critique of his epistemology is "esoteric and irrelevant,"<sup>50</sup> but that is the primary and major issue at stake

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48 Dan Vogel, "Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited: A Response to Richard L. Anderson, Stephen C. Harper, Daniel C. Peterson, Richard L. Bushman, and Alan Goff," 29 Mar. 2012. <<http://signaturebooks.com/2012/03/book-of-mormon-witnesses-revisited/>>. It appears the article was posted in March 2012.

49 Vogel, "Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited."

50 Schlesinger notes that most historians are very bad at engaging in abstract thought and argumentation, because they are disciplined to prefer the concrete and empirical, even if they don't understand the philosophical arguments. "We happily leave the philosophy of history to philosophers, whose analyses we imperfectly follow and whose theories of knowledge we habitually dismiss as irrelevant to historical practice." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "History: Text vs. Context," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 103 (1991): 4.

here. If Vogel starts from a positivistic foundation, his entire discussion of the issues will be skewed by that commitment. Perhaps Vogel believes that one can eschew metaphysics altogether and just begin from the empirical facts of the matter, free of all philosophical entanglements, but that would be to engage in another variety of positivism. Many historical practitioners assert that they don't have a philosophy, and that epistemological examination is a waste of time because it is irrelevant to the historian's task. Too little overlap exists between historians who practice the theory of history and those who write historical accounts, a gap that leaves the largest part of the discipline unaware of the avalanche of changes that has occurred in historiography<sup>51</sup> in the past few decades: "Many historians have felt that what is going on in philosophy is more or less irrelevant to what they themselves do. However,

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51 Scientists have a theoretical hierarchy: (a) the vast majority of practitioners who know nothing about the philosophy of science conceive of their endeavor in simplistic terms, (b) a few are aware of the history of science and understand how views of science have varied widely over the generations, and (c) some engage in a rarified philosophy of science. The last position is so intellectually forbidding that most scientists have little awareness of the philosophy of science (on campuses the teaching of that function is usually carried out by a philosophy department). The history of science proves a halfway house for some scientific practitioners to become informed about the issues. The situation is similar in history: most (a) practitioners are oblivious to the theoretical issues; then there is (b) historiography (the accounts historians give about how historical knowledge is generated), and (c) philosophy of history. Historiography is a halfway house (kind of philosophy of history for dummies) that permits some historians who reside there to free themselves from the positivistic conventional wisdom of the discipline. Few historians have the background to dip into the philosophy of history. "Fewer than 1 percent of the members of the American Historical Association list 'historiography and philosophy of history' as either a primary or secondary field of interest," Richard T. Vann, review of Richard Rorty's *Philosophical Papers*, in *American Historical Review* 97.4 (Oct. 1992): 1173. So when (c) philosophers of history or (b) historiographers write publications on the subject, there is no choir to preach to in the historical profession; the audience consists virtually of a congregation who don't want any theory with their sermon (although theory is precisely what historiographers and philosophers of history do).

as long as these same persons in their very practice also do make methodological statements based on epistemological and ontological presuppositions, they simply cannot pretend that philosophy is irrelevant. They are all in fact practicing some sort of philosophy, and it would certainly not hurt their work if they had realized this”;<sup>52</sup> Vogel may contemptuously dismiss philosophy as irrelevant and esoteric, but he nevertheless can’t avoid engaging in amateurish philosophical speculation. John Tosh notes that most historians just ignore philosophical debates about the status of historical knowledge claims, and the result has been confusion in the profession.<sup>53</sup> Joey Sprague notes that this tendency to dismiss epistemological concerns isn’t limited just to historians; “most researchers think of epistemology as a nonissue—or, more precisely, do not think of epistemology at all. We have learned to equate science with positivist epistemology, and for most people, the assumptions of positivism do not appear to be assumptions—they seem like common sense.”<sup>54</sup> Hunter refers to Whitehead on this issue of assumptions that are naturalized by their advocates (that is, taken as natural facts that no sane person could doubt): “These underlying assumptions are unspoken and undefended because, as Whitehead put it, ‘Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do now know what they are assuming because no

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52 Hans M. Barstad, *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israel and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 10.

53 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 1991), 131. Similarly, Finley notes that historians are trained to ignore philosophical and methodological questions and “get on with their proper business, the investigation of the concrete experiences of the past, and leave the ‘philosophy of history’ (which is a barren, abstract and pretty useless activity anyway) to the philosophers.” But in doing so the historian risks tremendous harm. M. I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Viking, 1971), 61.

54 Joey Sprague, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2005), 31.



other way of putting things has ever occurred to them.”<sup>55</sup> The problem with taking your fundamental ideas for granted is that most of them have a short shelf life, and positivism is way past its expiration date, so its price is subject to drastic discounts. This positivism is so dominant in our culture that every child in school is taught that subjectivity must be eliminated from the research process and an empirical approach used in sifting evidence to achieve objectivity.<sup>56</sup>

Vogel also wants to change the subject from my argument, which touches on the issues of the Book of Mormon witnesses only when it comes up in Vogel’s arguments about methodological concerns (that is, when Vogel goes the positivistic route while venturing into philosophical territory): “It is Goff’s extreme anti-positivist stance and lack of familiarity with the sources and subject that cause him to distort my arguments.” Since Vogel has misunderstood my argument, let me state it straightforwardly here (it has been the same argument I have made for the ten years I have been engaging Vogel on the issue of positivism, so his desire to change my argument from the one I make to the one he wishes I would make betrays an unwillingness to engage the positions but instead throw up distractions and red herring arguments): Vogel brings to his explanation a positivistic epistemology that affects which interpretations he allows as permissible. That epistemology is the subject of my argument, not the witnesses and not the sources. My concerns are much more fundamental than Vogel’s are, and my concerns are philosophical (disciplinary territory through which Vogel is loath to tread because of demonstrated incompetence). That epistemology is a conceptual filter for the evidence he adduces and the conclusions he arrives at. It is Vogel’s “lack of familiarity with the sources” relevant to

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55 Cornelius G. Hunter, *Science’s Blind Spot: The Unseen Religion of Scientific Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 7.

56 Sprague, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers*, 32.

these issues of positivism and epistemologies that makes his historical arguments superficial and uncritical. After referring to citation of his quotation about the Book of Mormon witnesses and reality, Vogel throws in a straw-man argument to divert attention away from his positivistic claims and revert to the sources, always a congenial rhetorical strategy for positivistic historians who believe the sources provide an escape from the entanglement of ideologies:

The connection Goff makes between my argument and positivism as he defines it is loose and his understanding of my argument is incomplete and amounts to a straw man. My *goal* here was not to argue that visionary experiences are *automatically* discounted, as Goff asserts, but to controvert Richard Anderson's superficial reading of the published Testimony (that the three witnesses' experience was a 'natural-supernatural appearance' of the angel and plates, that the angel was literally, physically, and objectively present) by bringing into the discussion the subsequent statements of Whitmer and Harris, which make it clear that it was spiritual, supernatural, and subjective. Thus the discussion was about the nature of the three witnesses' experience, not about the nature of reality. Goff conveniently ignores this context and tries to force the discussion into a path he understands better. If my discussion stresses the non-physical subjective nature of the witnesses' experience, it's not necessarily because I'm a positivist, naturalist, empiricist, or naive realist, but because apologists have presented the published Testimonies as *empirical evidence* for the existence of the gold plates.<sup>57</sup>

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57 Vogel, "Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited." One can't discuss "the nature of the three witnesses' experience" without resolving questions about

Vogel's statement is not, however, a claim about the sources: this is a philosophical claim about what kind of historical evidence is more reliable (and by the way, Vogel confuses the most basic philosophical distinctions, for discussion "about the nature of reality" is ontological rather than epistemological, the latter of which deals with knowledge and truth claims; perhaps Vogel wants to insist that ontology is irrelevant to historical argumentation as he clumsily works that district of philosophy also). It is Vogel's truth claims that are relevant to the question "Is Vogel a positivist?" rather than his relationship to his sources (although an archival positivism could make the resort to sources relevant). Vogel misconstrues my position because to address the real issue would require philosophical arguments which he eschews, which he is not fit to provide, and which he scorns to even consider.

Vogel doesn't recognize that epistemological issues are fundamental; he can't make judgments about the strength of various arguments until he has first made epistemological commitments. Typically those without philosophical training undervalue epistemological and metaphysical analysis, or worse, dismiss its relevance altogether; writers who can't do philosophy end up doing it ineptly through presupposition if they neglect explicit discussion: "Metaphysics may be a mug's game, but those who think they can avoid it by burying their heads in the sand are likely to wind up playing the game anyway but from the other end."<sup>58</sup> As Robert Eaglestone says about Holocaust issues, the same is true of Mormon history conflicts: "Just as with more historical accounts [that is, more historical than purely philosophical accounts], it is in the

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"the nature of reality," so it is a delusion to sever the two in favor of the local and particular. Inevitably the particular interpretive issues raise larger philosophical concerns.

58 Berel Lang, "Is It Possible to Misrepresent the Holocaust?" *History and Theory* 34 (1995): 84.

‘choice’ of explanation that the central problem behind this debate is revealed. It is impossible to accept an explanation without revealing or uncovering a truth about ourselves that may not be amenable to rational debate or discussion. Philosophical decisions are, as it were, the result of what is ‘pre-philosophical,’<sup>59</sup> and philosophical judgments precede historiographical conclusions. Vogel’s assertions about the historical past are deficient because of his refusal to take them up philosophically, which leaves him at the mercy of his ideological commitments untempered by epistemological analysis; this flaw marks the weakest part of his feeble argument. Unsurprisingly, Vogel wants to change the subject away from my philosophical argument to arguments more amenable to his ideological goals.

Vogel’s red herring attempt to shift the discussion away from epistemology and methodology and back to the concerns about sources and witnesses conceals the fact that sources aren’t the root of my disagreement with him. Even before Vogel can discuss evidence, he must resolve questions about epistemology, something he can do so explicitly or surreptitiously. Instead of being forthright in his philosophical commitments, Vogel chooses to reject epistemology as “esoteric and irrelevant.” Perhaps he means more narrowly to dismiss my particular epistemological inquiries as “esoteric and irrelevant,” but that would require an epistemological argument from him. He provides none and is incapable of providing any, as long as he views epistemology as esoteric and irrelevant.

Dan Vogel says about the Book of Mormon witnesses that what appears to be empirical evidence of David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery’s touching the plates and hearing an angel bear testimony has to be redefined as internal, psychological, and therefore not empirical: “Despite the use of

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59 Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (New York: Oxford U P, 2004), 305.

naturalistic language in the Testimony of Three Witnesses—particularly the emphasis on seeing the plates with their ‘eyes’ as well as the failure to mention the angel’s glory—subsequent statements by Harris and Whitmer point to the visionary aspects of the their experience. In other words, the event was internal and subjective in the fullest sense of a vision.”<sup>60</sup> Even when some historical actors assert empirical evidence, it is redefined by the positivistic researcher to be non-empirical (to grant that it is empirical to a positivist requires taking it seriously as evidence, exactly what Vogel wants to avoid). Discussing the Book of Mormon witnesses’ testimony, Vogel contrasts the merely psychological/inward experience with the objective/outward experience: James Henry Moyle asked David Whitmer about the experience by trying “to ascertain whether the angel’s appearance could be considered an objective event or if it was only experienced inwardly.”<sup>61</sup> Vogel denies the physical elements of the witnesses’ event by saying that “despite the naturalistic wording of the printed testimony, Whitmer’s candid personal account described what might be called a waking dream”;<sup>62</sup> and the account “was subjective and in the fullest sense a vision.”<sup>63</sup> For Vogel, sensory experiences are (or at least are potentially) objective and visionary (or “nonsensory”) experiences are subjective, for visions fall short of empirical or actual events and are therefore not historically valid evidence; this is an issue to which Vogel devotes so much time because of his positivistic commitments:

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60 Dan Vogel, “The Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2002), 86. See similar wording in Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 467.

61 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 445. These are Vogel’s words, not Moyle’s.

62 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 445.

63 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 444.

The manner in which Smith introduced later priesthood concepts into his 1823 interview with the angel makes one wonder if he ever viewed the vision as an empirical event. Indeed, it is difficult to treat as historical an experience which Joseph himself so freely recast. His willingness to change this and other visions in order to meet later needs prompts one to wonder whether the visions were invented to serve utilitarian purposes. I will treat Smith's visions in terms of the evolving stories he told people about them rather than as actual events.<sup>64</sup>

In Vogel's mind, all of this discussion of visions depends on a sharp distinction between mystical experiences (which are merely psychological) and empirical events (which are amenable to sensory analysis), and only the empirical can count as valid historical evidence: "One might therefore suggest that although Smith's vision had all the power and life-changing force of any mystical experience, it may have been less concrete to the senses than he would later imply," but may (Vogel speculates) have just used sensory language to describe purely psychological events: so perhaps "Smith used visual language to describe an experience that was nonsensory."<sup>65</sup> This is positivism in the fullest sense of the term. Similarly, seeing angels and speaking in tongues are too subjective to qualify as evidence to the positivist; "The evidently subjective nature of these experiences is attested to by William E. McLellin, David Whitmer, and others, who (contradicting the official version) reported they had no such experiences and suggested that the others only imagined them."<sup>66</sup> The following notion was developed by Comte but had a broad impact on historical

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64 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 44.

65 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 31.

66 Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1988), 128 n. 92.

writing in the twentieth century and became the dominant way of thinking about how to do science and “scientific history”: “Positivism can be briefly defined as the claim that true knowledge is derived from empirical inquiry and is subject to verification. Knowledge that cannot be verified is ‘merely subjective.’”<sup>67</sup> This word *verification* is key for positivists, who insist that the only valid form of knowledge is what can be empirically verifiable.<sup>68</sup> When applied to religious belief, the verifiability principle has the curious effect of requiring that religious statements no longer function religiously. Explicit versions of this positivistic criterion are seldom stated in philosophy of religion—except by those like Vogel, who haven’t

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67 William Austin Stahl, Robert A. Campbell, Yvonne Petry, and Gary Diver, *Webs of Reality: Social Perspectives on Science and Religion* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers U P, 2002), 42.

68 The positivistic verifiability criterion would invalidate whole fields of knowledge that nonpositivists are loath to discard: ethics, morality, and art, to name a few. In addition, professional judgment and expert opinion would be dismissed out of hand. I think I exercise professional judgment when I discuss literature and philosophy with my students and colleagues because over a lifetime of analysis I have developed expertise in the areas that is neither quantitatively measureable nor empirically derived. But a positivist completely discounts such experience and judgment as noncognitive. We expect radical (and now naïve) empiricists to assert that only knowledge based on sensory experience is valid and cognitive, but “there are too many things we know for certain but could not possibly know from experience. We know, for example, that there are time differences between New York, London and Tokyo, though we could not be in three places simultaneously to experience those differences. Any highly literate person’s ‘stock of knowledge’ includes a vast amount of information, irreducible to sense data, which she has understood and assimilated.” Bernard Waites, “In Defense of Historical Realism: A Further Response to Keith Jenkins,” *Rethinking History* 15.3 (Sep. 2011): 324. In fact, the vast bulk of what Vogel thinks he knows has not been derived from empirical observation but from reading other people’s written accounts or testimonials, especially when he puts his hand to writing biography. If we granted Vogel his wish and permitted only those bits of knowledge which he arrived at through his sense data as historical testimony, well, a small plastic bucket would suffice for transport. We should instead swear in trainloads, container ships, and transport airplanes as vessels of knowledge rather than the miniscule pile of sand guileless empiricists want to admit as witnesses before the historical bar of justice.

read any, because they have lost credibility; nevertheless, “the effects of that historical delegitimation are still with us today. Religious wisdom, if it is even granted this status, is commonly considered to be affective or ornamental, as opposed to offering real knowledge or insight.”<sup>69</sup>

When I assert that Vogel makes the stereotypically positivistic claim that positivists accept as valid evidence only that which can be empirically derived, Vogel says, “Of course, I never made that argument.”<sup>70</sup> If Vogel never made these positivistic claims, then the identity thief publishing under his name is an extreme positivist. We shall yet see if Vogel “never” made such an assertion; since my last engagement on the issue of Vogel’s positivism (on Chris Smith’s blog), I have read as much of Vogel’s writing as I could find. Vogel has been quite consistent in making this positivistic claim, which he now asserts he never made. Vogel avows I have mistaken his arguments, which are confined to the immediate context of trying to counter Richard Lloyd Anderson’s position on the three witnesses. Vogel asserts that his positivistic-sounding claims aren’t really positivistic but are merely tied to the specific Mormon sources he is responding to. But Vogel connects the specific context of the three witnesses to larger concepts about truth, knowledge, and method. He runs the argument up and down the ladder of abstraction, not just staying with “just the facts, ma’am,” although after the fact he asserts that he merely stays low on that ladder, resting on the concrete and specific rungs. Vogel is delusional to believe he can quarantine his analysis to the historical events without mixing concepts and abstractions into the recipe. Even the vocabulary he uses—“mystical” versus “empirical,” “subjective” versus “objective,” “naturalistic” versus “supernatural”—pushes the analysis

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69 Ronald A. Kuipers, *Critical Faith: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Religious Life and Its Public Accountability* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 67.

70 Vogel, “Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited.”



to higher levels of abstraction where Vogel's positivism can't help but leak out the seams of his decrepit conceptual bucket. Facts become facts only under the aegis of larger conceptual structures that tell the interpreter what to make of the facts. In Vogel's case, his discussion of the three witnesses is put in the service of a positivistic interpretive scheme which asserts that only empirical evidence deserves the name of evidence, while at the same time he violates his own rule by becoming conceptual.

Vogel can't resist writing letters to publications airing his grievances about "misreadings" of his work. He proclaims his positivism too straightforwardly in those letters for there to be much doubt about what he means.<sup>71</sup> Religious experiences (*paranormal* is the word he sometimes uses) for Vogel are not valid historical evidence because "revelations and visions are subjective." When positivism emerged, it challenged religion "as something meaningless and nonsensical. Positivism claims that scientific knowledge is the only genuine knowledge for it can be verified empirically"; and therefore religion is nonsense (that is, non-sense), since it can't meet the requirement of empirical verification or sensory observation.<sup>72</sup> Religion is thus relegated to the realm of the private, the emotional, the subjective.<sup>73</sup> According to Vogel, revelations can't be "verified" empirically, but "translations of ancient texts are subject to historical analysis and verification. My skepticism about some of Joseph Smith's metaphysical claims stems primarily, but not

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71 Historians attempt to keep their theoretical commitments covert when they write their narratives, but they often must make them explicit when forced to defend their interpretations. So it is unsurprising that Vogel's positivism is most manifest in these letters to the editor or when he is responding to criticisms. Everybody working with historical material has a philosophy of history, but many historical researchers aren't aware of those allegiances until they turn from covert to overt apologists.

72 Basil Pohlong, *Culture and Religion: A Conceptual Study* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2004), xviii.

73 Pohlong, *Culture and Religion*, xix.

exclusively, from my conclusion that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient document.”<sup>74</sup> Note that Vogel thinks he is in the business of verifying or disconfirming events by applying an empirical criterion to them; there is that crucial word *verify*—or as we shall soon see, the words *to test*—so vital to positivists as they filter subjective claims from objective evidence; Vogel also considers that he is in the business of dismissing “Joseph Smith’s metaphysical claims” because they aren’t empirical.

I am curious to know what Vogel means by “verifying historical claims.” I know in the physical sciences how one might verify or disconfirm the claim that planets such as Mars move through the night sky according to an explanation called *epicycles*, the phenomenon we now call *retrograde*. One would go out, like Tycho Brahe, on repeated nights (and over a couple of years) to chart the movement of a wandering planet against a grid. Similarly, if I want to see if certain bacteria are killed by a particular mold, I would repeat the exposure many times in a controlled lab environment; I would perform empirical observations with my own senses. How would one verify or disconfirm a historical event that happened nearly two centuries ago? Vogel does it by applying mistaken positivistic presuppositions about empiricism based on a false analogy between history and the physical sciences. Vogel isn’t making any empirical observations himself, so using the word *verify* the way Vogel does is a false analogy based on a comparison to the way events are verified or tested in physics or biology. When Vogel claims to be able to empirically verify (or falsify) events that occurred 185 or so years ago, he shows no recognition

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74 Dan Vogel, “Is This Academic Discourse?” (letter) *Journal of Mormon History* 33.1 (Spring 2007): vi. In addition to his use of positivists’ keyword *to verify*, here is another keyword, *metaphysical*. For positivists the empirical world is set against the metaphysical, the latter being too conceptual or subjective to qualify as real knowledge because it isn’t available to sensory examination.

that both terms (*empirical* and *verification*) are profoundly epistemologically and methodologically problematical. Vogel moves forward with this claim only through uncritical bluff and presupposition.

I shouldn't have to note that to deny particular metaphysical claims is to engage in philosophizing, particularly bad philosophizing by use of archaic notions, but philosophizing nevertheless: "As the positivists used it, verification serves as something like a litmus test to discriminate the genuinely factual statements of scientific philosophers from what they consider the pseudo-factual variety put forth by metaphysicians, theologians, and other philosophically retarded types."<sup>75</sup> This principle is less a conclusion and more a presupposition in Vogel's work (although as with most of us, Vogel's presuppositions and conclusions are all jumbled together). In another reply to critics posted on the Signature Books website, Vogel again asserts he is testing and verifying Joseph Smith's claims: "While it is true that Joseph Smith and his supporters held a different world view, I have no problem reporting their beliefs, nor do I doubt that these 'paranormal phenomena' were real to Smith and his followers. That is not the issue. More relevant is that among all these various claims is one that is testable: the Book of Mormon. Prophecy, revelation, and visions are subjective, but translations of ancient texts are subject to historical analysis and verification."<sup>76</sup> To Vogel, "paranormal" phenomena are untestable, unverifiable, and subjective. I submit that Vogel's readings of the Book of Mormon are no less subjective (if you want to get caught in the trap of dividing the world into evidence that is subjective versus

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75 Malcolm L. Diamond, Review of James Edwards's *Wittgenstein and Religion* and Kai Nielsen's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* in *Religious Studies Review* 12 (Jan. 1986): 17.

76 Dan Vogel, "Seeing through the Hedges: A Response to Andrew H. and Dawson W. Hedges," 24 April 2006. <<http://signaturebooks.com/excerpts/making2.html>>.

evidence that escapes subjectivity; the objectivity ideology has proven as fragile as other positivistic enterprises)—dependent on prior assumptions and ideologies—than are assertions about divine communication. Vogel’s “verification” and “testing” proceed hermeneutically and ideologically (rather than empirically, in any ordinary sense of that term), just like other historical interpretations.<sup>77</sup> Vogel’s “verification” method

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77 Aviezer Tucker notes that epistemological inquiry recognizes five types of evidence (and like a true positivist, Vogel insists that to be valid the evidence must be of Tucker’s first kind): (1) *empirical* evidence from direct sensory perception, (2) *a priori reasoning*, such as mathematical truisms, (3) *memory* from witnesses who recall an event, (4) *self-knowledge* from introspective examination (such as “I know I am tired right now”), and (5) *testimony* from people who tell us about some event we have not experienced ourselves. The epistemological tradition has until recently just examined numbers 1 and 2 (mostly because those are the procedural reasoning most commonly used in the sciences), but the other forms of knowledge have been explored more consistently in the past few decades. Historical inquiry is largely grounded on the last type: “the historiography of the human past relies on testimonies such as eyewitness accounts, diaries, and archived official reports.” “Where Do We Go from Here? Jubilee Report on *History and Theory*,” *History and Theory* 49 (Dec. 2010): 71–72. Virtually none of the evidence Vogel uses when writing up his historical research is empirical (that is, based on his own sensory observation) but is rather testimonial. So there is some irony to his insistence that the only valid form of historical evidence is empirical. Invalidating all the evidence adduced to support your own argument by committing a simple category mistake is a drastic failure of logic and the morals of epistemological inquiry. David Yamane notes that the religious experience the historian (or sociologist) takes up isn’t the historian’s experience: “I argue that when we study religious experience we cannot study ‘experiencing’—religious experience in real time and its physical, mental, and emotional constituents—and therefore must study retrospective accounts—linguistic representations—of religious experiences” (“Narrative and Religious Experience,” *Sociology of Religion* 61.2 (2000): 173). The sociologist, the historian—none can study an event such as the First Vision or the translation of the Book of Mormon. “Sociologists cannot empirically study experiencing, thus understood, for it is a wholly private, individual affair inaccessible to any currently known methods of social scientific research” (174). The rub in Yamane’s position (why Vogel can’t plausibly use it buttress his position that religious experience is subjective) is that Yamane would also assert that just as religious experiencing is beyond the reach of the historian and sociologist absent textual mediation, so is empirical experiencing. The researcher studies linguistic representations and fragments,

is textually based and depends as much on the presuppositions he brings to the task and the quality of his own reading ability as my readings of the Book of Mormon do;<sup>78</sup> Vogel's Book of Mormon readings aren't instances of exegesis but are shallow and compare very badly (they really don't compare at all) to the readings of Terryl Givens, Joseph Spencer, Grant Hardy, John Welch, and those of others, which move beyond superficiality

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not the events themselves; we study narratives, written narratives reflected on and interpreted dozens of times over.

78 Citing several sources, Kaya Yilmaz ("Postmodernism and Its Challenge to the Discipline of History: Implications for History Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42.7 [2010]: 786) comments on the problem for historians who claim also to be empiricists. The postmodern challenge burdens such positivists, because "when this critique is applied to the discipline of history or the way historians do history, its epistemological vulnerability becomes evident in several respects. First of all, in contrast to natural sciences, which enable scientists to directly observe their object of study, when this critique is applied to the discipline of history or the way historians do history, its epistemological vulnerability becomes evident in several respects. First, of all, in contrast to natural sciences which enable scientists to directly observe their object of study, the discipline of history does not allow historians to observe their object of study, the past or what has occurred in the past. There is an ontological gap between the past and history." Even the act of deciding what from the past is relevant to the study at hand is an interpretive act. Combine the hermeneutical aspect of the historian's task with the recognition that language is the medium of understanding, and you have a serious problem. Language isn't transparent, "something to be looked through"; rather it is "something to be looked at," as Yilmaz cites Toews. "What is explicit, therefore, in the postmodern critique of the conventional practice of history is the fact that history is essentially a textual subject or written sources and full of grand historical narratives" (787). Postmodernism poses a serious threat to Vogel's positivism, and the only way to counter that menace is to get philosophical. Rather than engaging their own philosophical assumptions and arguing them philosophically, "the majority of historians simply ignore or reject the postmodernist critique of history, continuing to practice history with older historicist conceptions and frameworks laid down by Ranke in the Nineteenth Century" in the hope that nobody will notice that their presuppositions are straightforwardly based on a more-than-century-old epistemology. Despite the fact that these postmodern challenges have been available for decades and have prompted "a great deal of discussion on such fundamental topics as the nature of historical work, the epistemology of history, and the mode of explanation and interpretation of history, [the] traditional empiricist approach to the study of the past still dominates the discipline" (788).

into the real depth of the Book of Mormon narrative. If you ask for close textual analysis of the Book of Mormon performed with subtlety and attention to detail and the text's intertextual and narrative qualities, Vogel's readings will be a terrible disappointment. Vogel's readings of the text are superficial because he begins from superficial assumptions. If that is what Vogel means by "verifying" the Book of Mormon, then Vogel's readers will be sorely tested.

The primary source of Vogel's ideological position is his prior commitment to a crypto-positivistic epistemology. While trying to distance himself from the New Mormon History, Vogel nevertheless admits that he shares positivistic assumptions (without recognizing that they are positivistic) with these historians: "While I agree with the New Mormon Historians that the metaphysical aspects of religion cannot be tested by historical means, artifacts, such as books, and events are completely different matters."<sup>79</sup> Religious experience, to positivists, isn't veridical (that is, an event in the real world) but is merely metaphysical or psychological: "To positivists and empiricists, religious or other symbolic meaning belongs (if anywhere at all) 'in the head': it is a psychological phenomenon pertaining to the realm of the subjective, a 'something' as individual and private as are other entities of the world of (scientifically ungrounded) opinion and taste."<sup>80</sup> Vogel's multiple appeals to this positivistic principle make it implausible that his assertion is tied to the specific context of the Book of Mormon witnesses argument; this positivistic

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79 Dan Vogel, "Don't Label Me," (letter) *Dialogue* 22.1 (Spring 1989): 6. Again, let me highlight Vogel's use of the words *metaphysical* and *test*: they carry a certain weight from the positivistic tradition, especially when used uncritically, and ought to set against their larger historical context, as I am doing here.

80 Jeppe Sinding Jensen, "Meaning and Religion: On Semantics in the Study of Religion," *New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Volume 1: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 225.

rule about religious experience not being subject to empirical verification (and therefore being invalid historical evidence) is more like an overarching interpretive principle for Vogel, because it comes up in multiple contexts but always with the goal of denigrating religious claims as unverifiable, as noncognitive, as meaningless. One can dismiss the house of epistemology and not even condescend to enter the front door, but that doesn't mean one can be free of epistemology. Vogel still must make epistemological claims, and that means he must try surreptitiously to sneak in the back door—but that makes him an epistemological burglar. It is no defense to go before the judge and say, "Well, I was just entering my own house, the house of history, when I broke through the lock of truth claims." The house of history is unavoidably a house of epistemology. Bad or uncritical epistemology inevitably makes bad history, if for no more reason than because it is uncritical history.

Joseph Smith's claims can't be tested using the empirical tools of the historian as long as Smith stays in the realm of visions and revelation, say positivists; however, once Smith creates empirically accessible evidence, according to Vogel he has left the realm of the subjective and entered the domain of the objectively confirmable or disconfirmable: "There are several reasons to reject the unconscious fraud theory but the most conclusive evidence is the plates themselves, as an objective artifact, which Smith allowed his family and friends . . . to handle."<sup>81</sup> The same is true of a contemporary spiritual experience, such as what Mormons call a testimony; it is not sufficiently empirical to satisfy a positivist: "As for testimony: spiritual experience is subjective and therefore cannot resolve historical questions."<sup>82</sup> Vogel asserts, and on

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81 Dan Vogel, "Either/Or," (letter) *Dialogue* 36.1 (Spring 2003): xi.

82 Dan Vogel, "Out of the Question," (letter) *Sunstone* 133 (July 2004): 4. It would indeed be problematical to attempt to resolve a historical conflict with the

this I don't disagree with him, that spiritual experiences occur in all sorts of cultures. However, Vogel believes that these spiritual experiences are produced in the limbic system and various lobes of the brain; they are, therefore, subjectively based on the emotional needs that religions satisfy and not objective conclusions, not on the "scientific" tools he thinks he deploys: "Scientific method was invented to override emotional biases and help us overcome our tendency to make subjective judgments";<sup>83</sup> that is how positivists reductively impoverish religious claims to measurable (at least in principle) brain activity. Those tangible plates are for Vogel valid empirical evidence of Joseph Smith's fraud. "Actually, Smith probably should not be compared to most other mystics since he tried to provide tangible evidence for his claims. When he produced the plates to be felt through a cloth or lifted in a box, he left the mystical realm of subjective truth and entered into the physical world of conscious deception."<sup>84</sup> Vogel often returns to this claim—that religious experiences occur only in the brain and are subjective, while any evidence that could be empirically

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kind of testimony Mormons hear in a testimony meeting, so Vogel and I agree on this point.

83 Dan Vogel, "The Real Conflict," (letter) *Sunstone* 132 (May 2004): 4. Positivists attempt to model their inquiries on the method used in science to cross into the promised land of objective, emotion-free, empirical analysis. This statement in itself isn't sufficient to accuse Vogel of that other positivistic claim (that inquiry must follow the unity of science model—that is, all research must in some way be modeled on physics or some other "hard science"), but its presence should provoke more questions about whether Vogel believes he is doing "scientific history." Is he applying the term *scientific method* to his own research? These appeals to "objective" evidence are, as both John Schmalzbauer and Gaye Tuchman note, "a credibility-enhancement rhetorical strategy that can be mobilized in situations in which professional claims to expertise or detachment come under attack." John Schmalzbauer, *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in American Journalism and Higher Education* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2003), 104. In other words, assertions about objectivity such as Vogel appeals to here should be viewed not as objective but as broadly political and rhetorical.

84 Dan Vogel, "Serving Two Masters," (letter) *Dialogue* 37.3 (Winter 2004): xi.



examined (not by the historian, so it isn't the historian who proceeds empirically—only the historical actors—and the historian must proceed textually<sup>85</sup> by interpreting the actors' accounts; at least positivistic scientists restrict their evidence to empirical factors they can repeat themselves, such as mixing chemicals in a lab or observing insects in the Amazon, not like historians, who proceed textually based on the reports of others)

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85 History and the social sciences can't achieve perception of reality as it is or as it really was. "This reality is a chaos of events." Instead, historians apply concepts or models to evidence from the past. "Although these conceptualizations are not taken directly from empirical observations but rather represent 'intellectual apperceptions' by which the historian or the social scientist seeks to penetrate and understand human actions, they nevertheless are capable of a degree of empirical validation." Georg E. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* revised ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U P, 1984), 38. In other words, even empirical events are alloyed with ideas, with what Vogel dismisses as the metaphysical. An empirical event happens in the past, and it is interpreted at the time by the actor. At least another layer of interpretation occurs when the event is recorded, by the same actor or another person. When the document is stored in an archive or written up in a secondary text, it goes through some layer of interpretation. When the researcher goes to the archive or recovers the event from a secondary source, another hermeneutical intervention happens (these hermeneutic geological deposits may well conflict with each other in specific contexts, but that makes them no less interpretive). The historian, even the positivistic historian, has an empirical event reading the narrative in the archive, but it would be naïve to assert the historian is proceeding empirically in examining the event that occurred 185 years earlier. The historian may impose positivistic requirements about the event from the past, but the researcher is advancing through texts, each layer of which requires interpretation. Even using the word *text* applied to both the recording of the event by the actor and the document the historian reads involves some ambiguity. "But can we qualify as a text both the written document (the only remaining trace of an older practice) and the practice itself?" asks Roger Chartier about ritual performances such as cockfights in Bali or cat massacres in Paris. "The massacre of the cats is not the cockfight: in relating it and interpreting it the historian is dependent on a report that has already been made of it and a text that is already in existence, invested with its own specific ends. This text exhibits the event, but it also constitutes the event as the result of the act of writing." Roger Chartier, "Texts, Symbols, and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57.4 (Dec. 1985): 685. The historian proceeds not empirically but textually and hermeneutically unless the historian is writing memoir (and then she or he is still working hermeneutically but also has access to the traces of the empirical event in memory).

using the physical senses is objective and valid (although still possibly mistaken): “In providing proof for his claims, Smith moved out of the mental/spiritual realm into the physical world and thereby created the either/or situation himself.”<sup>86</sup> This is classic textbook positivism, remarkable only for the persistence of those who deny it is positivism, people like Dan Vogel and Christopher Smith. Positivism began its intellectual decline when the main criterion of logical positivists (any proposition that is neither analytical—that is, true by definition—nor based on empirical observations is non-sense) was shown to be self-refuting. This claim itself is not based on empirical inputs. Yet those innocent of philosophy still adhere to this simplistic way of sorting what is valid proof from invalid evidence. The entire positivistic program began to collapse once this primary support was undermined. In these citations from Vogel, you can see his constant return to this venerable, outdated concept. It has also become clear over the past thirty years’ critique of empiricism that empirical data are also theory laden, never free of interpretation but bound up in conceptual, historical, and cultural ideas.

If facts are always theory laden, this poses a serious barrier for the historian who believes that historical facts are somehow free of concepts, ideologies, or ideas, because then all facts “contain metaphysical elements, [and] it becomes impossible to justify simple objective tests for theories because one is testing against theories, not against the facts. Further, if two theories differ radically in their fundamental metaphysical assumptions, it will become impossible rationally to compare them without using unwarranted standards.”<sup>87</sup> Even empirical evidence loses its purity in the account of the positivist, because Vogel’s positivistic metaphysics that helps create the facts is radically

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86 Dan Vogel, “Old Apologetics,” (letter) *Dialogue* 33.1 (Spring 2000): xi.

87 George Couvalis, *The Philosophy of Science: Science and Objectivity* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), 6.

different from my hermeneutical metaphysics. This notion of researchers working within paradigms that are internally consistent but can never be seen from the outside to determine which paradigm is superior to rivals was used by Kuhn and is more commonly discussed in the social science literature than in historiography, so I'll draw upon the philosophy of social science. Vogel is working within a paradigm called *positivism*, and while he thinks he is describing the past as it actually happened, all his facts are shaped and even made possible by a theory that empirical evidence is the only valid form of evidence. These "paradigms involve a shared set of symbols, metaphysical commitments and values, as well as criteria of judgement and the worth of work done. So, becoming a member of a scientific community involves enculturation into the paradigm,"<sup>88</sup> and members of such a community operation, under conditions of normal science most of the time, merely apply the criteria of that paradigm to the world to solve puzzles.

The work of historians rarely involves challenging the theoretical framework that holds the community together. Most histories, according to this explanation, aren't even aware they operate within a paradigm. They think they have some direct access to the facts of the matter free of metaphysical entanglement. But "all history is (whether the historian is conscious of this or not) intrinsically a theoretical enterprise. Historians cannot even begin to work, or, more precisely, begin to determine the object of their inquiries, without some form of analytical framework which construes the subject to be investigated."<sup>89</sup> So if Vogel is operating from within a rival paradigm to mine, he would quite naturally see my explanations as filled with bias and error: "Constructions of the subject that may seem absolutely 'normal' or a-theoretical to

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88 John Hughes, *The Philosophy of Social Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 1990), 73.

89 Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 86.

one historian may seem very one-sided or biased to another.”<sup>90</sup> Vogel’s construction of his story is “theory-drenched,” as Mary Fulbrook puts it. That isn’t necessarily a bad situation, because one can’t avoid it; everybody’s explanations are theory-drenched. The real problem is that Vogel doesn’t recognize that positivism isn’t just the way the world or the facts are free of all interpretation and ideology. If Vogel doesn’t recognize his positivism as problematical in this way, then you get him fulminating against my metaphysics as though he has none, sighing that these damned religious folk just don’t get it that facts are facts, and the only ones that count as facts are those that are empirically derived. This idea challenges “logical positivism’s central premises of the separation of theory from facts.”<sup>91</sup> Add to the notion that facts are theoretically constructed (at least partially) to the assertion that these paradigms are incommensurable (that is, they may use the same vocabulary but they mean different things and therefore one can’t get outside a paradigm to compare it to another but must always describe a rival’s paradigm from within your own).

If theories or models are circular, then they are almost impossible to disconfirm because of that circularity (perhaps not viciously so). Methods, theories, paradigms, they are preinterpretive interpretations because they assemble a particular explanation of a host of data, only part of which are needed to complete the interpretation based on “specific ontological and epistemological considerations. In David Easton’s pithy formulation, ‘A fact is a particular ordering of reality in terms of a theoretical interest,’ and methodological considerations are never absent from concrete empirical

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90 Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, 87.

91 Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 7.

research.”<sup>92</sup> Models, theories, methodologies already start sorting the evidence before the researcher is even aware of that function. “The use of a model has more in common with the act of interpreting a text than it does with the act of testing a hypothesis.”<sup>93</sup> Researchers have “an unfalsifiable core” in their preinterpretive character<sup>94</sup> because they assert that only evidence fitting its criteria will be viewed as valid evidence. So empirical evidence is always and inevitably interpretive. Empirical data are never brute facts free of interpretation. “The pervasive role of theoretical assumptions upon the practice of science has profound implications for notions such as empirical ‘reality,’ and the ‘autonomy’ of facts, which posit that facts are ‘given’ and that experience is ontologically distinct from the theoretical constructs that are advanced to explain it. The post-positivist conception of a ‘fact’ as a theoretically constituted entity calls into question such basic assumptions.”<sup>95</sup> Empirical facts are no longer the protected category of evidence that Vogel thinks they are. Facts are mediated by theories, by metaphysics, by ideologies. As Hawkesworth notes, this notion that facts are free of ideas and epistemologies is left over from a positivistic view designed with particular methodological commitments. “Chief among these is the dichotomous division of the world into the realms of the ‘empirical’ and the nonempirical.’ The empirical realm, comprising all that can be corroborated by the senses, is circumscribed as the legitimate sphere of scientific investigation. As a residual category, the nonempirical

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92 Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, “A Statistician Strikes out: In Defense of Genuine Methodological Diversity,” *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*, ed. Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 90.

93 Jackson, “A Statistician Strikes out,” 90.

94 Jackson, “A Statistician Strikes out,” 91.

95 Mary Hawkesworth, “Contesting the Terrain: Flyvbjerg on Facts, Values, Knowledge, and Power,” *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*, ed. Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 158.

encompasses everything else—religion, philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and evaluative discourse in general as well as myth dogma and superstition—and is relegated beyond the sphere of science. Within this frame of reference, science, operating within the realm of the observable, restricting its focus to descriptions, explanations and predictions that are intersubjectively testable, can achieve objective knowledge.”<sup>96</sup> Vogel’s positivism, as my citations demonstrate, falls squarely within the mainstream of positivism. It also sets boundaries about what can be counted as evidence that are designed specifically to exclude rival interpretations (not based on empirical evidence but on metaphysical and ideological commitments) that might challenge his positivistic interpretation.

Each theory is self-contained in a way that doesn’t permit it to describe opposing positions except in its own terms. What Vogel doesn’t recognize is that his notion of facts having to be empirically based in order to qualify as valid historical evidence belongs to a theoretical framework that can no longer be defended. And note that Vogel doesn’t even attempt to defend it. He merely takes it for granted. All researchers with some foundation in the philosophy of their disciplines agree on the “demise of positivist orthodoxies” so that the disciplinary consensus that supported it has now evaporated.<sup>97</sup> The rapid decline of positivism doesn’t mean that its adherents either know about its demise or admit it, but “problems and theories are often tightly intertwined, such that many problems are detectable as problems only from the standpoint of an alternative theory,”<sup>98</sup> and “much hinges on the epistemological and methodological choices we make.”<sup>99</sup> If you think that

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96 Hawkesworth, “Contesting the Terrain,” 168.

97 Keith Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 8–9.

98 Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry*, 185.

99 Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry*, 184.

the outside world imposes those choices on you rather than your deciding among rival theories and metaphysics, then you assent to a theory called *positivism*. Until the last fifty years of the twentieth century, most political scientists (and other disciplinary practitioners, for that matter), Murray Edelman notes, were “not self-conscious about the theories that guided the choice of topics, the generation of hypotheses, the procedures for examining them, or the interpretation of findings”; researchers were unwitting about the theories guiding their work and were “inclined to take their theoretical orientations for granted or regarded them as self-evidently valid.”<sup>100</sup> No conventional wisdom will be challenged in such a circumstance, and positivism was the conventional wisdom of much of the twentieth century. Since that collective agreement is no longer unchallenged, the situation is fraught with danger for those who continue to endorse (however unwittingly) the former consensus. “The collapse of the 1960s consensus around positivism and logical empiricism in the philosophy of social science has generated a variety of responses,”<sup>101</sup> but denial and ignorance shouldn’t be one of the responses tolerated. Researchers have a responsibility to know what they are talking about before they enter these debates, rather than just taking the previous conceptual framework for granted.

We never encounter the past as it actually happened, but we interpret those events from the perspective of the present. If the interpreter’s present is founded on a positivistic metaphysics,

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100 Murray Edelman, “Veiled Uses of Empirical Theories,” *Contemporary Empirical Political Theories*, ed. Kristen Renwick Monroe (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 100.

101 Alexander Wendt and Ian Shapiro, “The Misunderstood Promise of Realist Social Theory,” *Contemporary Empirical Political Theories*, ed. Kristen Renwick Monroe (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 166. I have dipped into the literature about positivism in political science just to show that a similar discussion is happening in that discipline. Positivism is being routed in the philosophy of social science, but the large percentage of a-theoretical practitioners still continue as though such a revolution hasn’t occurred.

then positivism is the screen through which the evidence from the past is filtered to separate the valid from invalid evidence. I have demonstrated that the empiricist variety of positivism is Vogel's fundamental conceptual scheme for determining what did and what didn't happen in the past. Even when the historical actors assert a supernatural interpretation of events, the positivist will insist on reducing that explanation to something amenable to his or her own positivistic/naturalistic ideology.

When Vogel encounters narratives told by David Whitmer, we see his positivistic naturalism at work, substituting a naturalistic understanding of the events for that offered by those involved. Vogel must invent a little fiction to try to displace Whitmer's account of a trip from Harmony to Fayette, which includes supernatural claims. As he does throughout his biography, Vogel permits himself way too much speculation about what might have happened instead of what the historical actors reported and the historical record states. Joseph Smith and David Whitmer set out in a wagon to move back to New York. Travelling with the Book of Mormon manuscript but not the plates, they overtook a man to whom they offered a ride. The man declined, and shortly after, Smith explained that the man was one of the Nephites carrying the plates.<sup>102</sup>

All historical accounts are mediated through language. Past events are mediated through contemporary language and concepts. "A major but often unacknowledged problem with historical knowing is that the past is not an object of sense perception that can be experienced empirically in the present."<sup>103</sup> Doing history isn't like interviewing witnesses to an event and sorting out the facts. The witnesses are dead (especially the farther past the past) or are operating from a memory that can be fragile, so the historian's ideological commitments

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102 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 379

103 Clark, *History, Theory*, 18.



and understandings play a large role in constituting the past. History is created by the historian from the shards that remain behind.<sup>104</sup> Whitmer told the story at various times later in life—in 1876, 1877, and 1886—including in the latter account that the man “suddenly disappeared.” Vogel needs to retool this story to accommodate his ideological agenda, because a divine agent disappearing from view runs against the grain of a naturalistic positivism, which asserts the non-empirical nature of divine agents. Here is Vogel’s transfiguration of the narrative:

Interpreting this event is difficult, not only because of the conflicting details but because of Whitmer’s need to tell the story in such a way as to head off skepticism. In 1877, he told Stevenson that he and the others felt strange, stopped the wagon, and then noticed the stranger was gone. This version leaves open the possibility that the stranger had simply left the road unnoticed. The following year, Whitmer told Smith and Pratt that the man seemed to vanish into thin air when Whitmer momentarily turned to look at Smith, which makes a naturalistic explanation more difficult. Nearly a decade later, Whitmer would remove speculation by rearranging the story’s elements so that they see the stranger disappear, stop the wagon, and then experience a strange feeling. This seems to be an instance where Whitmer’s fairly reliable memory shifted over time to conform to his subsequent psychological needs. The first version is likely closer to the truth, at least as initially perceived by Whitmer.<sup>105</sup>

Vogel’s clear positivistic/naturalistic prejudice provides the psychological need for him to prefer one of Whitmer’s accounts to the other, imputing to Whitmer a faulty memory when he

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104 Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 19.

105 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 380.

recounts the story involving supernatural events, despite the fact that Whitmer uses empirical terminology and evidence, such as *seeing*, *talking*, and *feeling*. Here is where Vogel invents a fictional story not in the historical record or archives but still necessary to harmonize the narrative with Vogel's ideological needs and causes Vogel to prefer the least supernatural version as closest to history as it actually happened. Vogel even obliges the reader by referring to his own imaginative reconstruction of the account:

By giving the 1877 version priority, we can imagine that the stranger left the road and passed into the woods or disappeared behind a bluff while Whitmer and the others were distracted. Oddly, the account suggests this by explaining that they noticed the stranger's absence "soon after they passed." Was this soon after they passed the stranger or when they passed something else—some change in the terrain such as a clearing, woods, or gully? Smith may have given this a supernatural interpretation when, in reality, it was merely an old Methodist circuit preacher carrying his Bible to his next meeting.<sup>106</sup>

It is a real stretch to reinterpret "soon after they passed" to mean something so counterintuitive to the context. As a biographer, permitting yourself such wide latitude to substitute the account the actors gave for one more acceptable to naturalistic and positivistic tendencies through imagining a story of your own novelistic invention is an extraordinary liberty. Here Whitmer provides empirical description of the stranger's appearance and disappearance, yet Vogel prefers to swap his own speculative account of the trip for that offered by those who experienced it. Here, Vogel overrules the empirical

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106 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 381.

evidence (Whitmer's own record of what he saw and heard) for that of his own conjecture. Vogel's commitment to a naturalistic ideology trumps his commitment to the only empirical eyewitness evidence offered (that by Whitmer).

Similarly, just a few pages previous to this wild speculation and discounting of the witness provided by someone actually present, Vogel uses a similar tactic in reinterpreting David Whitmer's account of his trip to Harmony. Whitmer notes that Smith and Cowdery were already out on the road coming to welcome Whitmer. "After greeting his friend, Cowdery introduced him to Smith and explained that the seer had seen Whitmer in his seer stone, which is why they had known he was approaching."<sup>107</sup> In fact, Vogel notes that Smith told Whitmer when he left on his trip and each place he had stayed on the three-day trip. Vogel invokes the notion of a cold reading often used by psychics, palm readers, and frauds: "This involves moving gradually from general to more specific statements based on educated guesses and reactions from the client."<sup>108</sup> Overruling the experience of the historical agents who reported the event, Vogel substitutes for the spiritual/religious interpretation one of his own based on his own presumption of Smith's deception. "Smith perhaps surmised the place Whitmer had lodged the previous night by calculating wagon speed and time of arrival. With this information, he might have been able to calculate where Whitmer would have stayed the first night as well as the approximate time of his departure from Fayette. It is also possible that Smith ran into someone who had seen Whitmer along this major thoroughfare through northern Pennsylvania, which came within feet of Smith's front door. In a slow-moving wagon, Whitmer would have been passed several times by travelers on horseback on their

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107 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 377.

108 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 70.

way to Harmony or beyond.”<sup>109</sup> Vogel’s fictional story doesn’t account for the fact that Cowdery and Smith knew to leave their house to go out to meet Whitmer on the road, so it doesn’t even bother with certain nonnaturalist parts of the narrative. Vogel much prefers his own speculation to the evidence offered by the witnesses, but evidence and experience that contradict Vogel’s ontological and epistemological presuppositions are dismissed as Whitmer’s faulty memory or Smith’s duplicity. Vogel’s commitment to empirical evidence in these two examples is overruled by his antisupernaturalist creed. Now a certain type of positivist would respond to my criticism by asserting that the supernatural connection is precisely what there can be no empirical evidence for. Whitmer empirically observed the stranger on the road and experienced Smith telling him about his journey from Fayette to Harmony, but the attribution to divine causation is what can’t be defended. So deploying his positivistic metaphysics, Vogel doesn’t deny that there was an old man on the road or that Joseph Smith accurately told Whitmer about his journey; with no empirical evidence beyond his own conjecture, Vogel suggests his own alternative account, because for a positivist the intervention of a deity in human affairs is among the explanations that are precluded a priori because of previous ideological commitments. For the positivist the divine element is all subjective or psychological, all in the

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109 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 378. Notice that in his recounting of this story, Vogel uses “passed by” to mean one traveler overtaking another on a road, which fits the context quite well. He doesn’t assert the bizarre notion that some fictional traveler might have passed by hills or gullies and made it to Harmony before Whitmer to report the progress of the wagon. One’s ideological preference can be a powerful tool in determining which explanations are offered. In the account Vogel invents, “passed by” means what it normally means; when Vogel wants to cast doubt on an actor’s story in the historical record, the phrase “passed by” gains all sorts of strange and wondrous possible meanings. Vogel’s highly selective skepticism is a rhetorical tool deployed in ideological fashion. I here deplore neither rhetoric nor ideology, for they are both inescapable, but Vogel asserts a lack of subjectivity—an objectivity—for his accounts that is hardly in evidence.

subject's mind but not in the veridical, empirical world. But then, so is Vogel's alternative explanation of these exchanges with David Whitmer, except they are all Vogel's "subjective" interpretations based on his own psychological needs.

At times the historian might need to overrule the explanations offered by the historical agents (the latter may suffer from delusions, from misapprehensions, from deception, or some similar problem in the historian's judgment); such interpretive freedom should be the last resort rather than the common resort. Because the historian has preconceived notions about the world, he or she inevitably makes the evidence fit into those preconceptions, even if it means overruling the most important evidence (which is usually the statements of the historical actors). Despite the fact that traditional historians abhor the thought of having to do theory, they are natural-born theorists. They just don't recognize their empiricism or positivism as a theory. It is, however, a theory that organizes the evidence, discards some facts as nonhistorical and noncognitive and endorses other evidence as valid and factual. "Any writer, regardless of standpoint, must approach historical problems as theorists do, abstracting from the welter of events in terms of some preconceived scheme, which is why claims for the virtues of intuition or common sense are evasions of the problem rather than any kind of solution to it."<sup>110</sup> Empirical evidence, just like all other evidence, must go through a screening process that is itself not empirical but philosophical and theoretical. Empirical evidence is already the result of interpretation.

When the secularist historian rejects the religious claims of actors in the past, care should be taken not to be reductive or dismissive of the interpretations of the experience offered by the actors themselves; historical writers who are unwitting ideologues, like Vogel, need particularly to guard against this

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110 Fred Weinstein, *History and Theory after the Fall: An Essay on Interpretation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 18.

tendency. The interpretations must take into account two different languages: (1) that of the people who reported them and (2) that of the observer. "Choosing only one of the two languages distorts the experience of one of the two groups of people involved, a situation that must lead to ideologically contaminated conclusions."<sup>111</sup> Weinstein notes of the Protestant reformers that if their motives are simplistically reduced to enacting the ideology of capitalism or of an aspiring ruling class, that interpretation would distort the experience of the actors elucidated by the actors. "Such an argument, which does not rely on data, denies the authenticity of the religious experience of the people involved, falsifying the world that they lived in by denying the reality of the problems of the world as they perceived them. In other words, the observer's interpretive stance must include the perspectives of the people who lived through events so that the observer's abstract, ordered, unifying version of events could arguably or conceivably have made sense to them. At least, an observer must be able to imagine that, if he or she explained an interpretation of events to the people who participated in them, they could acknowledge the truthfulness of it."<sup>112</sup> Dismissing the claims of the actors involved should be done carefully and in a measured way, not cavalierly and routinely.

After noting that history is a discipline too little theorized, Davies notes that the dominant epistemology of historians is similarly underanalyzed. "For the last 200 years at least, most historians have drawn their professional ideas and beliefs from one theory. This is empiricism. The central doctrine of empiricism, that true knowledge of the world comes ultimately

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111 Weinstein, *History and Theory after the Fall*, 80. One can talk of "ideologically contaminated conclusions" only if it is possible to have conclusions uncontaminated by ideology. So I think Weinstein's terminology is unfortunate here.

112 Weinstein, *History and Theory after the Fall*, 80.

from sense impressions, underlies most of the practices and arguments of professional historians.”<sup>113</sup> Empiricism depends on the correspondence theory of truth, notes Davies, and that makes it an epistemological theory. It has been a tough half century for the correspondence theory. Among historians, empiricism has been little analyzed, while it remains the predominant attitude among them.<sup>114</sup> It also means that empiricism has particular philosophical weaknesses that historians are seldom aware of. “The main one is that the past cannot be experienced directly beyond the lifetime of a living observer. Therefore, our knowledge of the past is indirect and rests upon the testimony of evidence that has survived to the present.”<sup>115</sup> So when Vogel uses empiricist distinctions to deny that the three or the eight witnesses saw physical plates, he is relying on empiricist and positivistic notions to divide what is objective from what is subjective.<sup>116</sup> But the philosophical merit of empiricism/positivism has been radically undermined, whether Vogel dismisses that sweep of history or not. One thing is certain: the fragility of those positivistic and empiricist claims has been made increasingly apparent, whether or not the researcher disregards such philosophical work as esoteric and irrelevant.

For Vogel, only the physical, empirical experience can reach the status of the objective. In Vogel’s words, when James Henry Moyle asked David Whitmer about the experience of the gold plates and angelic testimony, Moyle was disappointed with the “metaphysical aspect” of the witness. Moyle, again in Vogel’s positivistic phraseology, “attempted to ascertain whether the angel’s appearance could be considered an objective event

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113 Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 1.

114 Davies, *Empiricism and History*, 3.

115 Davies, *Empiricism and History*, 5–6.

116 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 442–49.

or if it was only experienced inwardly.”<sup>117</sup> So even though Whitmer described empirical sensations, Vogel redescribes them as “mystical, “subjective,” and “metaphysical.” “Despite the naturalistic wording of the printed testimony, Whitmer’s candid personal account described what might be called a waking dream.”<sup>118</sup> It takes a high degree of incompetence and unexamined ideological commitment to scorn examination of the entire superstructure of your own ideas as irrelevant simply because of your own disdain for such interrogation.

Empirical evidence is never immaculate perception; it comes trailing clouds of concepts. Empiricism is a theory of reality and of knowledge conjoined. “No empirical activity is possible without a theory (or at least elaborate presuppositions) behind it, even if these remain implicit, perhaps unconscious. All historians have ideas already in their minds when they study primary materials—models of human behavior, established chronologies, assumptions about responsibility, notions of identity, and so on. Of course, some are convinced that they are merely gathering facts, looking at sources with a totally open mind and only recording what is there, yet they are simply wrong to believe this.”<sup>119</sup> Vogel’s positivism and naturalism<sup>120</sup>

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117 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 445.

118 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 445.

119 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 62.

120 Vogel claims he is a naturalist, not a positivist. Roy Bhaskar’s definitions of the concepts are mainstream, while Vogel’s are loopy. Bhaskar notes that initially, naturalism was offered as a contrast to supernaturalism; the supernaturalist appealed to some explanation beyond nature, such as God. The naturalist asserted that the physical world around us is enough to account for everything. Today, naturalism is usually a series of interlocking views (most researchers don’t believe in God, so they have moved beyond that initial definition of naturalism): (1) human and social life need no resort outside nature or matter (explanations should be naturalistic or materialistic), (2) both social and natural explanation should be explained scientifically using the same method (this is often called the unity of science argument), and (3) a denial of the fact-value distinction asserted by Hume, among others. Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism*



don't permit divine messengers to mingle with humans, so even when Martin Harris and David Whitmer assert physical objects (that is, potential empirical observations) as part of their divine manifestation, Vogel raises logical fallacies to undermine the physicality of the vision. "Harris's and Whitmer's accounts have common elements: the angel, the table, the plates and other objects, the angel speaking, the voice of God. Yet, one does not know if the two men saw the same angel, the same table, and the same plates. One does not know if they heard the same voices or the same words or if their experiences lasted the same length of time."<sup>121</sup> The logical fallacy here is an appeal to silence or an appeal to ignorance: if we don't know that something didn't happen, we can make the logical inference that it did. If we don't know that Harry Truman isn't a communist, then we can conclude that he is. You can't prove that a vast conspiracy didn't combine to kill Martin Luther King, so it is logical to assert that one did. Since Vogel lives several time zones ahead of me, we don't know that the same sun that sets in his sky also sets in my sky. We don't know that when Vogel refers to the current President of the United States, he is referring to the same person as when I use the same phrase. We don't know that when my daughter called a few days ago on Skype, she is the same person who left in June for the Dominican Republic, so we can assume that the recent caller was an imposter. This assertion by the positivist Vogel is more worthy of the idealist George Berkeley than by an intellectual descendent of Auguste Comte. Such radical skepticism can be raised hypothetically, but Vogel must be very selective in his use of such doubt, for if he applied it to his own empirical observations, his theory of knowledge would be radically undermined, because he

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and *Human Emancipation* (New York: Verso, 1986), 118. Throughout the history of debate about naturalism the dominant argument for naturalism has been positivistic. Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, 119–20.

121 Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 447.

constantly makes causal and explanatory connections that we don't know are true, so we can therefore conclude that they are false. Vogel applies his extreme skepticism so selectively that it is easy to discern the ideological content behind it. He never subjects his own assertions to such radical doubt; he does it only when attempting to undermine the veracity of historical evidence he wants to discount.

Callum Brown notes three definitions of empiricism that often get conflated to the confusion of those involved; and this problem is compounded for those not accustomed to thinking philosophically, but particularly for those who dismiss philosophy as esoteric and irrelevant: (1) empiricism as an event happened when the Enlightenment introduced the empiricist approach and refined it, (2) empiricism as a method emerged out of the Enlightenment approach to knowledge with the view that "knowledge is acquired through an apparatus of human observation, experience, testing of authenticity, verification, corroboration and presentation for judgement (or peer review) by others in a value-free form." The third view of empiricism is full of difficulties and burdens in these postmodern times. "In the work of many academics across science and non-science disciplines, there is an implicit notion that empiricism constitutes all that is necessary to knowledge—that it is a complete system of knowledge with no other connections."<sup>122</sup> The problematical nature of the last definition of empiricism is that "empiricism gives the illusion of delivering fact, truth and reality, by slipping from the event to a human narrative that describes the event. This slippage is from empiricism as method, to empiricism as a philosophy of knowledge. In the process of slippage, the fact becomes coloured by all sorts of influences and biases, becomes an interpretation, but masquerades as truth."<sup>123</sup>

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122 Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 23–25.

123 Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*, 30.

Nobody is against empirical observations. They are some of the best evidence for constructing a sense of nature, human nature, society, and even the past. Empirical evidence becomes problematical only when it becomes an -ism—empiricism. When the positivist insists that empirical observations are the only avenue to knowledge, empiricism becomes an ideology, a dogma, a religion. Vogel's positivism is foundational for the structure erected on it. Its footings and foundations are so haphazard and dangerously unstable that the entire edifice will have to be torn down. That the builder and architect isn't even aware that the structure was built to a code forty years obsolete means the house will have to be built on less sandy soil or supports sunk down to bedrock after the current building is razed. The interpretations are unreliable because the base is so unstable.

In his attempt to shift the issue away from philosophical questions and back to the sources, Vogel must resort to discussion of ontology and epistemology, even though he has declared philosophy "esoteric and irrelevant": "Of course, to count visionary experiences as historical evidence one would have to decide that visionary experiences were real, as opposed to hallucination or deception."<sup>124</sup> Discussions about reality are in the realm of ontology. This assertion about hallucination is not an argument relevant to the question I was asking in my critique of Vogel (does Vogel make positivistic assertions? and what are the consequences for his argument if they are positivistic?), but it is relevant to Vogel's denial that he is a positivist. In other words, Vogel admits he has to make an epistemological argument that visions aren't sufficiently empirical to amount to historical knowledge; he does that only through smuggling in positivistic claims and not arguing for the presupposition behind his argument. Let me rephrase Vogel

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124 Vogel, "Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited."

just to make obvious what is at stake: of course, to discount visionary experiences as historical evidence one would have to decide that visionary experiences are merely “subjective,” “hallucinatory,” or “deceptive”—a decidedly epistemological assumption for someone who insists epistemology is esoteric and irrelevant. Later in the same paragraph, Vogel makes the epistemological argument that he has neglected to make explicitly except through appeals to what every positivist knows: “We know humans hallucinate; we don’t know that they have extrasensory experiences with real angels and plates. Before we treat visions as historical evidence, Goff needs to tell us how to distinguish hallucination from a real vision, or at least acknowledge the ambiguous nature of such evidence.”<sup>125</sup> To use the word *know* is make an epistemological claim, one that Vogel makes only implicitly, because to make explicit what he surreptitiously builds into his argument would be to make his positivism overt. By the way, I don’t need “to tell us how to distinguish hallucination from a real vision, or at least acknowledge the ambiguous nature of such evidence” in order to make the argument I was making (that Vogel is a positivist); Vogel may want to shift that burden of proof on me, but to do so is to engage in a logical fallacy as well as a different argument. I acknowledge that religious experiences are ambiguous and require interpretation; empirical observations are also equivocal and just as surely require a hermeneutical approach—there are no brute, interpretation-free facts. The more general the claim about all empirical evidence or all spiritual experience, the more tentative should be the conclusion; the evidence needs to be examined in its particularity.<sup>126</sup> Vogel does philosophy, but he does it covertly,

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125 Vogel, “Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited.”

126 In other words, Vogel works too uncritically in deductive fashion: (1) mystical/religious/paranormal experience is merely subjective/mental/emotional and insufficiently empirical, (2) the claims Joseph Smith made were reli-

uncritically, and badly. He engages in what he has termed “an esoteric and irrelevant discussion about epistemology” without even being aware that he is doing so and without the slightest resort to the relevant scholarly literatures; more seriously, Vogel shows not the slightest hint of recognition of the irony in dismissing epistemology while engaging in it (uncritically) himself. Haskell notes the discomfort historians have with analysis of ideas. Possession of a PhD is no guarantee against “epistemological naiveté,” and “as long as historians continue to flee from theory, confuse description with explanation, and make a fetish of accumulating redundant empirical detail, the approach set forth here will seem to most members of the profession an unduly abstract and exotic enterprise.”<sup>127</sup>

Vogel then does ontology (that is, he talks about the nature of existence) in the very process of explicitly avoiding philosophy: “Is Goff willing to concede the possibility of hallucination? Thus I conclude: ‘Given the fact that the three witnesses saw a vision and that the experience of the eight witnesses seems to have been similarly visionary, there is no compelling evidence that Joseph Smith actually possessed anciently constructed plates.’ Note that this conclusion is a rejection of the empirical-evidence arguments of the apologists, not a categorical rejection of supernaturalism. Nevertheless, Goff veers off topic into a discussion of the nature of reality.”<sup>128</sup> By the way, I willingly concede the possibility of hallucination; I just don’t think you should get there by building a positivistic logic into

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gious, (3) therefore they weren’t veridical but merely psychological. In this argument all the work is being done by the positivistic presupposition of the first premise.

127 Thomas L. Haskell, “Responsibility, Convention, and the Role of Ideas in History,” *Ideas, Ideologies, and Social Movements: The United States Experience since 1800*, ed. Peter A. Coclanis and Stuart Bruchey (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999), 2–3. Haskell doesn’t seem to be aware that the dichotomy of explanation versus description is another inheritance of the positivistic tradition.

128 Vogel, “Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited.”

the argument. Vogel here is talking about fundamental reality, and he was doing the same in the original argument; he just isn't and wasn't aware that he was and is sneaking ontological and epistemological assumptions into his position without recognizing the need to argue for them.

Vogel then asserts that my response to him is incoherent as he reels off a series of straw man arguments he imputes to me:

Goff has also smuggled in a question-begging definition of “reality” that includes the supernatural and then argues that materialism can't explain all reality. Obviously, one must assume reality includes supernaturalism before one can accept Goff's criticism of materialism as an incomplete worldview. Like assuming invisible purple elephants exist before conceding the categories of grey and white (and rare pink) elephants are incomplete. Thus Goff begs the question by assuming what he has yet to demonstrate, and that's a problem for him. So he attempts to shift the burden by suggesting that materialists need to prove supernaturalism doesn't exist—otherwise they hold a “naïve” worldview based on metaphysics, the same as the supernaturalists. This is not only a highly questionable way of attaching the label of metaphysics, but also a feeble attempt to defend faith by attacking naturalists and materialists with *tu quoque* (“you too”) *ad hominem*. My own skepticism of the supernatural is not based on naturalism or materialism, but rather on the insufficient warrant and incoherence of the supernaturalists' position.<sup>129</sup>

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129 Vogel, “Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited.” Look again at Vogel's use of the word metaphysics—a perfect example of how someone qualifies as an unwitting positivist. He asserts that I attach the word to what he does, as if he believes he doesn't do metaphysics but I unfairly impose a metaphysical apparatus on his metaphysics-free interpretations.”

## Vogel's version of my argument totally misconstrues my

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I unfairly impose a metaphysical apparatus on his metaphysics-free interpretations. Everybody has a metaphysics, a conceptual understanding of the world prior to any empirical inputs; empirical evidence wouldn't make any sense without a metaphysical foundation that preexists the physical facts. Vogel can't stop making positivistic claims in the very same essays he vehemently denies he is a positivist. I don't "attach" the "label of metaphysics" to his interpretations as if metaphysics were an alien imposition, icing that goes on the cake once the cake is finished but can easily be scraped off; I merely point out the metaphysics he builds into it. His cake is metaphysical from the point he gets the flour (even from the point the wheat is grown in Iowa), the baking powder, and the sugar out of the cupboards. Everybody has a metaphysics (including those who metaphysically deny having a metaphysics), and it is only the positivistic tradition that asserts the possibility and desirability of avoiding metaphysics. "Every historical discourse contains within it a full-blown, if only implicit, philosophy of history," says Hayden White (*Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978], 126–27). Summarizing White, Clark notes that a metahistory is embedded in the history "well before the so-called writing stage" in the historian's choice of tropes to configure the history. "And this prefiguration is not some incidental embellishment, but shapes the entire narrative from start to finish. Choosing a mode of emplotment consciously or unconsciously commits a historian to a philosophy of history" (Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 99). That historians have a long history of denying their own metaphysics is another variety of positivism I have taken up elsewhere and won't comment on further here. Anti-metaphysical positivism is merely the opposite side of the empirical-positivist coin. Empiricists believe they get at the brute, uninterpreted facts of the matter free of all conceptual frameworks. No empirical approach will answer the question "What is knowledge and how can we filter true historical claims from false ones?" One needs a metaphysics to do that work; Vogel himself furtively does that metaphysical work, unaware that he is doing metaphysics. When positivists declared metaphysics meaningless, "the effect of this [positivist] argument was extraordinary. Metaphysics, religion, aesthetics, and ethics, all ceased, virtually overnight, to be philosophically respectable. Since subjects like these simply throw around statements that can never be verified" (Stephen Ross, "Positivism, Pragmatism, and Everyday Life," *Society* 28 [1990]: 43). Vogel's positivism is so pervasive and so uncritical that he makes these positivistic assertions even as he denies making positivistic assertions; I don't attach the label of metaphysics to Vogel's claims but merely point out the metaphysics he smuggles in. Vogel does epistemology and metaphysics, but particularly defectively. "Social scientists, like everybody else, are philosophers of knowledge. In other words, they all have theories of knowledge—epistemologies—of which they may not be clearly aware" (Len Doyal and Roger Harris, *Empiricism, Explanation, and Rationality*,

position. It attributes to me arguments I never made but ones Vogel no doubt wishes I did. Vogel is awful at constructing historical arguments but quite expert at assembling logical fallacies. I don't "assume reality includes supernaturalism": I do assert that positivists too often smuggle the denial of the supernatural into their arguments through presupposition. Vogel attributes all these logical fallacies to me because I accused him of them first. It is a cute rhetorical trick and a red herring, but not relevant to the assertion that Vogel is a positivist.

Christopher Smith has criticized me for describing Vogel as a positivist.<sup>130</sup> In the discussion following his blog entry, Smith says that Mormon historians, and Vogel in particular, write positivistic-sounding claims, but they don't really mean them. They are really just enhancing their own rhetorical positions among other historians; they are merely insufficiently philosophically sophisticated to state what they mean in non-positivistic terms. Smith says that although Vogel is using questionable terms, such as referring to religious experience as subjective and by saying non-empirical evidence doesn't stand up to the standard of real historical evidence that is objective and empirical,<sup>131</sup> Vogel is not making the positivistic assertion

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1). Most historians want to be no philosophers at all, but consequentially they end up instead being bad philosophers by default.

130 Christopher Smith, "Sgoffing at Positivism," *Mild-Mannered Musings: A Miscellaneous Collection of Musings on Theology, Philosophy, Science, History, and Sacred Texts* 18 Sep. 2009. 25 Mar. 2012 <<http://chriscarrollsmith.blogspot.com/2009/09/sgoffing-at-positivism.html>>. Smith is Vogel's friend and thinks I have treated Vogel unfairly.

131 The "subject-object dualism may be considered to be a root of positivism" (678), because "objective reality consisted of the physical, material world, whereas everything that was not physical or material, e.g., feeling, belonged to a subjective realm." This notion of a solidly empirical objective realm of knowledge opposed to a subjective ideological realm stretched from Descartes to contemporary times because it became the common idea of how the scientific method works. Abhijit Jain, "Non-Dualism and Information Systems Research," *Information Systems Research: Relevant Theory and Informed Practice*, ed.



that evidence must be empirical before it counts as valid, he is just saying that we should trust our everyday experience more than we trust putatively supernatural events. Smith has to rephrase Vogel's claim to try to ease it out of what informed commentators consider to be positivistic territory.

While I think everyone involved in the debate (including Smith) would concede that Vogel is philosophically naïve, excusing Vogel for making positivistic assertions by rephrasing his claims in a nonpositivistic way shouldn't be the first resort; people should be taken to mean what they say, especially when those statements represent the conventional wisdom of the last few generations of historical researchers and are repeated so many times by Vogel before they were brought into question by critics that they can't so easily be recast as declaring something entirely different from what they say. Vogel and Metcalfe have elsewhere asserted that the model of revelation asserted by Mormons can't be true, but should be redescribed as Joseph Smith taking elements from his environment and reworking them in imaginative ways:

Where does this leave inspiration and revelation? Where they have always been: in the realm of subjective judgment. We are free to explore the historical and human aspects of scripture, but determining whether a concept is "inspired" or the "word of God" must always remain purely individualistic. When we realize that there is no empirical evidence either for or against scriptural inspiration, we begin to avail ourselves of

a more sensitive, responsible scholarship as well as a more honest faith.<sup>132</sup>

Vogel's "more honest faith" entails making a leap of faith into positivistic dichotomies between subjective (Vogel and Metcalfe use that word, but that is also what I take "purely individualistic" to mean here) and objective, between the empirical and merely psychological. This division between what is rational and objective in opposition to what is subjective and personal seems so natural to positivists because of the triumph of positivism in the various disciplines.<sup>133</sup> Many working in history want to limit true knowledge to that which can be "ascertained via the scientific method. This approach to epistemology is variously referred to as empiricism, positivism, naturalism, or objectivism," and its goal is to eliminate subjective information in order to focus "on what can be measured quantifiably in the natural or seen world." Because the positivist attempts to limit what can be considered true knowledge, what ends up being discarded as metaphysical can be dismissed in one of two ways: first, "anything that could not be measured via the scientific process could be private, unverifiable knowledge .... A person could believe in a supernatural realm, but that had nothing to do with real knowledge gained through scientific investigation. Thus, what one knows can be divided into the public and personal realms, resulting in objective and subjective 'truths.'" The second approach is for the positivist to dismiss any supernatural claims as nonsense.<sup>134</sup> The assertion

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132 Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Joseph Smith's Scriptural Cosmology," *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake: Signature, 1990), 212.

133 Michael Loughlin, "Reason, Reality and Objectivity—Shared Dogmas and Distortions in the Way Both 'Scientistic' and 'Postmodern' Commentators Frame the EBM Debate," *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 14, no. 5 (2008): 666.

134 Bruce W. Speck, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A Literature Review," *Searching for Spirituality in Higher Education*, ed. Bruce W. Speck and

that religious experience doesn't count as historical evidence because it is insufficiently empirical, and empirical evidence is the opposite of the subjective—that is, it is objective—is what the rest of the world calls positivism.<sup>135</sup> This is the type of claim that outside of revisionist Mormon historical circles theorists recognize as such.

Positivists responding to religions claims, at least since A. J. Ayer, have asserted that religious experience isn't really cognitive—capable of producing genuine knowledge—because such experience is merely subjective and psychological, not based on empirical demonstrations where real knowledge comes from. “A believer's experiencing God is not given through sense-experience, but he/she experiences God as an object of his/her emotion. . . . Therefore the positivist concluded that religious experience has purely subjective content and was psychological in nature.”<sup>136</sup> Every informed commentator recognizes this

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Sherry Lee Hoppe (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 4–5.

135 Vogel knows that using the word *objectivity* is now rendered problematical, so he avoids it. Instead he asserts his objectivity by implication, suggesting that interpretations which disagree with his are subjective, thus making his claim to superior objectivity through implication. But this is still a claim to objectivity. “What is the nature of objectivity? First and foremost, objectivity is the suppression of some aspect of the self, the countering of subjectivity. Objectivity and subjectivity define each other, like left and right or up and down. One cannot be understood, even conceived, without the other” (Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007), 36–37). Subjectivity is a difficulty, as Vogel asserts, only if it can be avoided; else why make the point repetitively? Vogel's own arguments are highly subjective and highly questionable, but they rely on an unstated faith in an obsolete notion of objectivity, in which the influence of the interpreter and the interpreter's ideology can be minimized or extirpated. “It is perhaps conceivable that an epistemology without an ethos may exist, but we have yet to encounter one. As long as knowledge posits a knower, and the knower is seen as a potential help or hindrance to the acquisition of knowledge, the self of the knower will be at epistemological issue” (Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 40). Additionally, as Vogel demonstrates, “objectivity fears subjectivity, the core self” (Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 374). Perhaps we ought to inquire into Vogel's own subjectivity as the source of his obsessive fear of subjectivity.

136 Pohlong, *Culture and Religion*, 36.

as a positivistic assertion (that is what it means to be informed on this topic, to recognize positivism when it presents itself, especially in such easy cases as Ayer, Vogel, and McMurrin<sup>137</sup>). A summary of Ayer (the arch-positivist of the twentieth century) and the tradition following him is also referred to by Jensen, where she notes that Ayer dismissed religious claims as cognitively meaningless, and this positivistic view of religion became widespread after the 1950s. “To positivists and empiricists, religious or other symbolic meaning belongs (if anywhere at all) ‘in the head’: it is a psychological phenomenon pertaining to the realm of the subjective, a ‘something’ as individual and private as are other entities of the world of (scientifically ungrounded) opinion and taste.”<sup>138</sup> Vogel’s classic and stereotypically positivistic assertions duplicate those taken by most of the scholarly world to indicate positivism. These positivistic assertions were the common currency, the taken-for-granted way to create historical knowledge, while positivism was the dominant mode of producing history at least through the 1980s. Positivism continues to govern the historical profession, but since its intellectual foundation has been radically undermined, it rules by falling back on a disciplinary consensus that no longer exists and by attempting to avoid discussion of its epistemological foundations. A primary feature of positivistic claims is the argument that assertions must be analytical (true by definition) or empirically verifiable, else they are nonsense. Other assertions are metaphysical and therefore inaccessible to

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137 That Smith and Vogel can’t get the simplest notions about positivism right doesn’t inspire confidence in their other historical interpretations, for “when intellectual dishonesty (or gross incompetence) is discovered in one part—even a marginal part—of someone’s writings, it is natural to want to examine more critically the rest of his or her work” (Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), 7). Smith’s and Vogel’s ruminations on positivism are nothing if not uninformed and incompetent.

138 Jensen, “Meaning and Religion,” 225.

experience. “Assertions about alleged matters of fact that transcend sense experience—theological and ethical statements, for example—are declared to be meaningless.” Almost all statements about God are therefore dismissed as irrelevant. Citing John Wisdom, Henry then notes the positivistic denial of statements about God’s existence or actions in history “would be not claims about what is actually the case in the externally real world but characterizations of one’s personal perspective”<sup>139</sup>—whether you call them subjective or purely individualistic.

Vogel wants to continue making the same claims that have been diagnosed as positivistic through the last generation of theorists’ work but at the same time avoid having them called such, all without consulting any of the relevant literature or engaging epistemological argumentation; Smith didn’t know about this pattern of positivistic claims asserted by Vogel, so we ought to give him the opportunity to recant the statement that Vogel has never unambiguously made positivistic assertions. Before I gathered these citations in this essay, the only person who was aware of the widespread resort to this persistent positivism was Vogel (because, after all, he wrote them), and even he denied that he ever made these positivistic claims. It is unsurprising that Vogel calls epistemology “esoteric and irrelevant”; epistemological examination threatens Vogel’s ideological enterprise by putting it into the context of recent intellectual history. From the exact match between what positivists say and what Vogel says, the reader can see that epistemological discussion is anything but esoteric and irrelevant; no discussion could be more relevant, as difficult as metaphysical and epistemological argument might be. Smith wants to aid and abet in the denial and continuation of positivism. One result of the turmoil about positivism in

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139 Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows, Fifteen Theses, Part Two*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 347–348.

sociology (and all other disciplines, for that matter) since the 1960s has been that the word *positivism* has become a pejorative. The methodological positivism that still dominates sociology is “a combination of an empiricist ontology, a positivist epistemology, and a scientific version of naturalism. The reason for initially defining this conglomerate object in such abstract terms is that it allows me to identify positivist positions even where writers eschew the self-description.”<sup>140</sup> Almost all positivists deny being positivists. Sociologists have responded in one of four ways (the first best describes what has happened the subfield of Mormon history): “First, many sociologists have continued to work in the same way as before but have simply renamed their positions or ceased to describe their own work in epistemological terms at all”; second, some have attempted modernizing positivism to include the insights of the logical positivists; third, some reformulate their positivistic approaches in a move to separate the epistemological weaknesses from the quotidian research projects; and finally, some take the criticisms of positivism seriously and abandon what can’t be defended;<sup>141</sup> obviously, the fourth approach is the preferred one, but it is difficult to stop justifying historical claims in the way that work has been done for a century. Chris Smith insists that Vogel may make positivistic-sounding assertions but is not simply based on that a positivist: “The claim that Dan Vogel fundamentally *is* a positivist because he supposedly sometimes

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140 George Steinmetz, “Sociology: Scientific Authority and the Transition to Post-Fordism: The Plausibility of Positivism in U.S. Sociology since 1945,” *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 277–78.

141 Steinmetz, “Sociology: Scientific Authority,” 277. Note that for those working in Mormon history, positivism is a revolving door with a single exit, which is also the only entrance. These researchers adamantly insist they aren’t positivistic, but the denial has no impact on the positivistic claims they make except they intensely desire to no longer discuss the issue. But they always, always end up exiting the door exactly where they entered and exclaim that to have made the circuit means they always won’t be and never were positivists.

says things that are positivistic (though you've not yet quoted a convincing example of such a positivistic statement from Vogel himself) simply does not bear scrutiny. When one examines Dan's historical inferences and conclusions, one is hard-pressed to find any sign of positivistic reasoning."<sup>142</sup> I assume Smith would be satisfied that Vogel is a positivist if I found a number of Vogel's assertions that repeat this positivistic claim in a variety of contexts that it is (at least way before he realized positivism is problematical) a fundamental epistemological tenet of Vogel's historiography. I count a multitude of instances, in more than twelve different sources, where Vogel asserts what both Smith and Vogel deny he claims. These citations range from the late 1980s virtually until this essay is published. Vogel maintains the positivistic claim that religious experiences are invalid historical evidence because they are insufficiently empirical is "a position I did not take,"<sup>143</sup> but one can see that Vogel consistently *did* make this argument, and it is his *habitus mentalis* when he interprets historical evidence, his taken-for-granted, how-could-any-reasonable-person-think-in-any-other-way? approach to religious experience. That Vogel makes this positivistic assertion, about religious experience not rising to the level of real evidence which must be empirical, so many times demonstrates a certain recidivist positivist appeal that bodes ill for either Vogel or Smith correcting their courses on

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142 Christopher Smith, "Sgoffing at Positivism," *Mild-Mannered Musings: A Miscellaneous Collection of Musings on Theology, Philosophy, Science, History, and Sacred Texts*. 5 Feb. 2010 1:51 p.m. 25 Mar. 2012. <<http://chriscarrollsmith.blogspot.com/2009/09/sgoffing-at-positivism.html>>. Now, Smith is and was wrong. I had in that post-blog entry discussion cited some of Vogel's positivistic claims, but here I cite a host more. I don't see how Smith can continue to assert that he is unaware of "a convincing example of such a positivistic statement from Vogel himself" anymore. To assert that "one is hard-pressed to find any sign of positivistic reasoning" in Dan Vogel's writing is simply astonishing and betrays a straightforward lack of understanding about the relevant issues and the content of Vogel's publications.

143 Vogel, "Book of Mormon Witnesses Revisited."

this issue; any remedy would require a direct contradiction of the positions they have already taken and therefore a retraction and apology.

Since Vogel persistently made these positivistic assertions in various contexts before (even after) he was sensitized to the issue by my criticisms, I think we can take him at his word that he means what he says, although both he and Smith would like now to withdraw these claims, since positivistic declarations have proven philosophically problematical and rhetorically disadvantageous, Smith by reinterpreting what Vogel said and Vogel by redefining what positivism is. Vogel was voicing what he believed was the common sense of the scholarly world when he articulated his positivistic claims in the 1980s, 1990s, and the twenty-first century; it was a consensus that had already become outdated by the 1980s, requiring mental gymnastics, such as explaining the positivistic claims by asserting that the researcher just wasn't sufficiently informed to say what he or she really meant.

Smith is slightly philosophically better informed than Vogel (although woefully unacquainted with the expansive and easily accessed literature about positivism) but is still an apologist in offering up these ad hoc justifications that positivistic claims are something other than positivistic. But Smith's strategy of recasting positivistic claims by saying that when researcher X said P, what he really meant to say was not P, might work in an instance or two, but when the examples start to pile up, then the reader must conclude that these writers assert what they really mean, and we don't need to transfigure the claims by alleging that the person making the claim didn't express himself well. Smith has taken up the task of explaining away positivism rather than explaining it. Smith asserts that Vogel really means what he never says in those passages (when Vogel himself comments at the end of the online discussion, he denies Smith's interpretation that these positivistic assertions



are merely rhetorical devices aimed at other historians; Vogel insists they are what he avows they are—claims about what should and should not count as valid evidence). I think it more plausible to believe that when someone reiterates an idea so many times, the researcher really means it. When campaigning, FDR promised at a rally in Pittsburgh that he would never raise taxes. When in the White House, he had to raise taxes, but that recalcitrant promise stood in the way. He asked a speech writer what to do. Sam Rosenman told him, “Deny you have ever been in Pittsburgh.”<sup>144</sup> Smith’s strategy for saving Vogel from charges of positivism seems similar. Deny that the writer ever said what he said; instead assert that he meant something entirely different from what he persistently said.

When Vogel entered the Liberty Pages online discussion about matters historiographical, he defended the idea that he himself and all other Mormon revisionists were not positivists. Like other apologists for Mormon historical positivism, Vogel advanced outlandish definitions of what positivism is and isn’t:

I think the introduction to my biography makes it abundantly clear that I’m not a positivist. Positivist historians would not attempt an interpretive biography, nor would they draw on psychology and sociology. They certainly would not describe themselves as “ontological naturalists.”

Whereas a positivist seeks to establish history on positive grounds, I’m comfortable with interpretations that carry various degrees of probability. Hence, I would describe my position as basically a post-positivist ontological naturalist.<sup>145</sup>

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144 Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2010), 230.

145 Dan Vogel, “Goff on Positivism at Signature,” *Mormon Metaphysics: Contemplations within Philosophy and Theology*, 28 Sept. 2004 posting <<http://>

Vogel has never made a statement about positivism that hasn't been fundamentally wrong, a basic misunderstanding of the position; Vogel has never defined positivism, identified positivism, or attributed or denied positivism in regard to a researcher either adequately or accurately. In taking up Vogel, who has gotten virtually every assertion about positivism incorrect, the reader ought to have qualms about other statements he makes when addressing complementary epistemological matters, so vast and deep is his ineptitude. As they are usually defined, naturalism is the ontology that fits most comfortably with the epistemology that is positivism, so the two tend to fit like a custom key and lock (naturalism can cross over and become epistemological when it is defined as a methodology—the historian should use the same empirical method as the physicist); the naturalism Vogel confesses fits the positivism he disavows like spandex fits a cyclist—tightly and form fittingly once you mount that bike. Vogel seems unaware that psychology and sociology are two disciplines where positivism has remained more resilient than others (in other words, his drawing on psychology and sociology strengthens suspicions of positivism rather than relieving them); most positivists are also anti-supernaturalists—the two categories broadly overlap (the majority of practitioners in all disciplines are positivists—but the position is widely rejected by theorists in each field). Positivism and its related cluster of ideas (empiricism, behaviorism, naturalism, and in some minds science)<sup>146</sup> governed as the orthodoxy of social scientific research during the twentieth century; and became “the philosophical epistemology that currently holds intellectual sway within the domain of social research,” although its influence is on a definite downward arc.<sup>147</sup> The disciplines Hughes mentions

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[www.libertypages.com/clark/10110.html](http://www.libertypages.com/clark/10110.html)>.

146 Hughes, *The Philosophy of Social Research*, 16.

147 Hughes, *The Philosophy of Social Research*, 16.

regarding the dominance of positivism in a chapter entitled “The Positivist Orthodoxy” are sociology, political science, psychology, and history. In those fields, positivism is still the (weakening) orthodoxy, which was never the unanimous position of the social sciences during the twentieth century, but “it served to set the lines of debate, and in so far as this took place, about the nature of the social sciences. It was positivist philosophy of social science that had to be argued against” that became what Kuhn calls normal science of the period. Positivism was the orthodoxy that “for the greater part of this century . . . was the dominant philosophy of science and it has been influential in sociology since the discipline first developed.”<sup>148</sup> Azevedo notes that positivism, empiricism, and naturalism are such closely related ideas that “the most commonly used generic term for these positions in the social sciences is *positivism*”; and “while positivism is no longer dominant in philosophy of science, it still dominates sociology, at least in the United States.”<sup>149</sup> The “esoteric and irrelevant” turns out to be the “essential and primary,” because it uncovers what the uninformed feel they can take for granted in their claims about reality, society, and the past while attempting to slither out of having the name *positivism* applied to their approach. When Vogel first took up the issue of positivism in 2004, he started from a position of complete ignorance, and in half-a-dozen interventions (in online discussions and postings on the Signature Books website) since then he has known less about positivism with each iteration.

Although naturalism and positivism can be distinguished, they are almost always fellow travelers. Note that Vogel’s positivism corresponds to the definition provided by Robert Frykenberg when he discussed the types of presuppositions

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148 Jane Azevedo, *Mapping Reality: An Evolutionary Realist Methodology for the Natural and Social Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 14

149 Azevedo, *Mapping Reality*, 41.

historians usually bring to their work (of all these keywords positivists use to make their arguments, so many of them are expressed by Vogel):

The second category of presuppositions is itself, like the first, also a form of bias. Sometimes labeled “positivist,” sometimes “verificationist,” “scientific,” “empiricist,” or even “physicalist,” this category is intrinsically just as much an ideology as any other. Positivism in its more extreme forms has also been secularistic and antsupernaturalistic. Its underlying presupposition has been that no valid understanding of any event is possible that does not come to us directly from empirical observation. Only findings modeled by empirical methods and verificationist procedures, especially those used by the physical sciences, have been seen as sufficient or valid. Coming into vogue during the Enlightenment and becoming increasingly popular among historians during the nineteenth century, this view has consisted in a belief that *methodology*, in and of itself, could bring about a more *perfect*, if not a more total, comprehension of events. At last, a fully “objective,” “pure,” and “untainted” grasp of events could be possible. Cleansed of all bias and preconception, especially of anything supernatural or theological, a historian could distill “true facts” from more solid data. Solid data, taken from validated evidence, could produce facts. Facts of pristine authenticity, once established and rigorously tested, could speak for themselves.<sup>150</sup>

Vogel’s is the empiricist brand of positivism. The more he discussed his historical explanation of the Book of Mormon

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150 Robert Eric Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 316–317.

witnesses and the plates on that discussion board, the more he convinced the other participants that he was indeed a positivist, despite his adamant denials.<sup>151</sup> He also entered the discussion trying to defend the notion that Sterling McMurrin wasn't a positivist (a pretty good test of whether or not Vogel grasps the relevant issues and definitions),<sup>152</sup> another proposition on which he failed, because Vogel simply hadn't read the relevant sources. No matter how many times Mormon revisionists make positivistic claims, these revisionists refuse to admit that any of their company are positivistic. It is a matter of principle and presupposition among these researchers that none of them are positivistic, no matter what claims the researchers make in their writings. One ought to look at the epistemological claims made by historians to determine whether or not they are positivists, not dogmatic and bizarre definitions that preclude the possibility regardless of evidence. George Steinmetz notes a certain methodological positivism with a "specific

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151 Clark Goble, "Goff on Positivism at Signature," *Mormon Metaphysics: Contemplations within Philosophy and Theology*, 2 Oct. 2004 posting and 3 Oct. 2004 posting <<http://www.libertypages.com/clark/10110.html>>. See also Blake Ostler, "Goff on Positivism at Signature, *Mormon Metaphysics: Contemplations within Philosophy and Theology*, 3 Oct. 2004 posting <<http://www.libertypages.com/clark/10110.html>>.

152 McMurrin's writings are filled with an orthodox, simple positivism. Take for example his assertion that he can't endorse claims about the existence of a personal God. McMurrin's response is boilerplate positivism: "My reservations rest rather on the conviction that, when tested by rigorous empirical criteria of meaningfulness, much of the content of metaphysics, including theology, proves to be quite meaningless, however interesting and attractive, and that the meaningful remainder such as it may be, is so highly speculative that even if we come out of the ordeal with the truth we nevertheless have no way of knowing that it is the truth." Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1965), 119. Admitting that McMurrin is a positivist is perilous for Vogel because the latter makes the exact same epistemological claims as does the former. One understands the vehemence and emotion with which Vogel has denied that McMurrin is a positivist, but understanding of the issues and literature is lacking. Admission that McMurrin is a positivist is tantamount to admitting that Vogel is a positivist.

cluster of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions” among sociologists in the particular, which includes “a combination of an empiricist ontology, a positivistic epistemology, and a scientistic version of naturalism.”<sup>153</sup> All of this analysis allows Steinmetz to deal with the problem we have among Mormon historians—we can define positivists as such even when they “eschew the self-description.”<sup>154</sup>

These epistemological issues that Vogel asserts are “esoteric and irrelevant” (keep in mind that back in 2004 in the Liberty Pages forum, Vogel didn’t think the discussion about positivism was esoteric and irrelevant, but he set about attempting to argue his position—very badly—on philosophical grounds; it is only since he experienced the abject failure of his philosophical arguments that Vogel has decided that they are irrelevant anyway; it is too easy to dismiss as inconsequential those intellectual fields in which the researcher is inept) can only be viewed as unimportant from within an epistemological position that takes for granted its own notions of truth. If a researcher is uncritical and uninformed about his or her epistemology and truth claims, then the ideas tend to be advanced as self-evident truths without a need for argumentation. “The more ideas about truth are taken for granted and not discussed (in literary studies and in history, for example), the more significant, perhaps, is their role. Whether implicitly or explicitly, truth has been central not only to the major debates in philosophy, but the humanities in general.”<sup>155</sup> Recent discussion (since about the 1980s) in historiography has severely questioned the traditional empiricist view of historical research that most historians accept without questioning. When Vogel assumes uncritically the traditional historiographical view about empiricism, he fails to subject his own epistemology to analysis:

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153 Steinmetz, “Sociology: Scientific Authority,” 277–278.

154 Steinmetz, “Sociology: Scientific Authority,” 278.

155 Eaglestone, *The Holocaust*, 6.

“The discipline of history has a history and is constructed as a particular form of knowledge and approach. Most significantly, because it represents itself as akin to a positivist science, it aims to recreate the past by representing *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, ‘what actually happened.’ ... Second, it demands that the historian must be objective and stand outside his or her location in the world. Third, it demands that the historian follow an empirical method and, passive in the face of the facts, simply marshal the evidence.”<sup>156</sup>

This positivistic epistemology of history has been most explicitly articulated in Mormon studies by Sterling McMurrin, the same philosopher Vogel adamantly insisted wasn’t a positivist. So McMurrin is a good measure of Vogel’s distorted ideas about what constitutes positivism. McMurrin noted that “the main gift to theology [of the previous half-century’s philosophy] has been to question its very meaningfulness. Unless a proposition has cognitive meaning, it can be neither true nor false, and the verdict of much analytical philosophy has been the key propositions of the theology basic to the intellectual foundations of cultured religion are meaningless.”<sup>157</sup> This is a standard positivistic assertion commonly made fifty years ago. For McMurrin, these claims are meaningless because there is no referent for terms such as “God” and “soul.” McMurrin goes on to assert that if theologians and metaphysicians are careful enough, they will be able to “formulate cognitively meaningful sentences in theological discourse”;<sup>158</sup> for a positivist the claim that “these people assert God and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith” is meaningful because it is verifiable, but to claim that “God and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith in the grove” would be meaningless because it is not verifiable. McMurrin

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156 Eaglestone, *The Holocaust*, 233.

157 Sterling M. McMurrin, *Religion, Reason, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah P, 1982), 15.

158 McMurrin, *Religion, Reason, and Truth*, 16.

not only applies this positivistic criterion of meaningfulness to theological claims, he himself also notes that this claim is positivistic.<sup>159</sup> The only disagreement with this positivistic claim McMurrin voices is that he believes, unlike some positivists, that a few theological claims may be able to pass muster as cognitively meaningful claims.

In his lectures delivered in 1992 but published after his death, McMurrin once again restated his commitment to a positivistic epistemology. He notes that claims made by the theist, the agnostic, and the atheist all fall short of knowledge according to a positivist epistemology, because neither the theist nor the atheist can articulate what kind of evidence would falsify the claim that God either does or doesn't exist.<sup>160</sup> McMurrin calls this position *positivistic*, and he expresses his agreement with it.<sup>161</sup> One must only compare McMurrin's epistemology (and Vogel's, for that matter) to one of the classic statements of positivistic philosophy. A. J. Ayer asserts that the claims made by the theist are meaningless, for "as he says nothing about the world, he cannot justly be accused of saying anything false, or anything for which he has insufficient grounds. It is only when the theist claims that in asserting the existence of a transcendent god he is expressing a genuine proposition that we are entitled to disagree with him."<sup>162</sup> The religious believer, as long as he or she doesn't make any propositions, is quite entitled to belief. According to this positivist position, when propositions are asserted, then the believer is in opposition to science. For Ayer, claims to having religious experiences are interesting only for what they reveal about the psychology of the believer, "but it does not in any way imply that there is

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159 McMurrin, *Religion, Reason, and Truth*, 17.

160 Sterling M. McMurrin, *Sterling M. McMurrin Lectures on Religion and Culture* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Humanities Center, 2004), 112–13.

161 McMurrin, *Sterling M. McMurrin Lectures on Religion and Culture*, 113.

162 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), 116.



such a thing as religious knowledge,” for unless the theist “can formulate his ‘knowledge’ in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.”<sup>163</sup> Notice also how similar Ayer’s and McMurrin’s claims are to Vogel’s. Same words, same phrases, same concepts, same intellectual heritage—positivism.<sup>164</sup>

Sociologist Michael Hill notes that explanations of religion that explain away the supernatural or religious experience themselves involve a judgment of what is and is not real. Anything that cannot be reduced to this approach is left behind as nonsensical:

The questionable aspect of this procedure is the assumption that such a translation is possible without eliminating a meaningful part of the phenomenon being studied, and since religious adherents themselves regard certain kinds of non-empirical statement as meaningful, this would seem to indicate that a satisfactory explanation of their actions must at some point include—at least in part—this aspect of their definition of the situation. Any attempt to explain away religion in naturalistic terms presents the sociologist with an unnecessary and, I think, misguided task, but

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163 Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 119–20.

164 Note that Vogel’s almost exact repetition of these positivistic claims undermines the notion that he is thinking for himself. He is thinking through a tradition, and doing so uncritically, because he isn’t even aware of the connection to that tradition. Vogel’s rote reiteration of these positivistic ideas that have been stated in these exact words for over a century shows how deeply these positivistic ideas have penetrated even popular thought if the devotees of that tradition don’t show even the slightest awareness of the intellectual heritage they are lifting ideas and phrases from. It is understandable that McMurrin, who was trained as a philosopher during a time when positivism reigned with little challenge, would articulate such positivistic catch phrases, but for Vogel, who shows no evidence of having read a word of philosophy, to repeat these positivistic verities shows how strong positivism’s influence is over the modern mind.

since this approach has a long pedigree in sociology it is worth studying at length.<sup>165</sup>

Hill calls this approach “positivistic.” Filtering the hallucinated from the empirical, the subjective from the objective, the mystical from the experienced, is all part of this tradition. The privileging that goes on when the revisionist historian claims that the authority of science doesn’t recognize the ideological assumptions inherent in science: “The hold that positivism has on science, including the social sciences, has blinded many to the biases that are inherent in our ethnocentric acceptance of science as a superior cognitive system. While we need not apologize for our belief in science, we must acknowledge it as one belief system among many.”<sup>166</sup> So when Mormon commentators claim science for their team, such an idea operates oblivious to the double ideological commitments: the ideological commitments carried by the researcher and the ideological commitments associated with claiming science for the historian. In denying the faith claims of Mormons, these positivists do the double reversal of adhering to what Poloma calls “the faith of positivism.”<sup>167</sup>

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165 Michael Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (New York: Basic, 1973), 13.

166 Margaret M. Poloma, “Toward a Christian Sociological Perspective: Religious Values, Theory and Methodology,” *Sociological Analysis* 43 (1982): 96.

167 Poloma, “Toward a Christian Sociological Perspective,” 105. It is understandable that Vogel and other revisionist historical researchers are committed to the belief system called positivism. It dominated the self-image historians (and researchers in every other field) had of their discipline during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We should recognize how disconcerting it must be to have one’s most fundamental beliefs challenged. Referring to Tocqueville, the Zuckerts note that most people live by opinion, and “few have the leisure or inclination to examine their own fundamental beliefs; most find it unproductive and frustrating when they or others do so.” Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006), 44. In the passage from *Democracy in America* the Zuckerts refer to, Tocqueville cites dogmatic beliefs held by people. A person must accept so many beliefs based on common opinion because to examine every single commitment individually would consume all of one’s time. “No philosopher

Vogel asserts that my definition of positivism and its vocabulary is “highly specialized” and therefore odd or out of the ordinary: “I think Alan too easily overlays his highly specialized definitional language on what he reads. I use the term ‘subjective,’ and that opens a whole discussion on what that implies about my beliefs in objectivity. I don’t think we have direct access to ‘reality,’ but I think we can still talk about what is real and what is imagined. Alan thinks that I automatically discount visionary experience because I’m an empiricist. Given the human propensity for hallucination, and the myriad of failed religions that have started with visions, I think we are justified in being skeptical. The point of my essay on the Book of Mormon witnesses was to show that the experiences of both the three and eight witnesses were visionary and that the possibility of hallucination exists.”<sup>168</sup> Vogel’s own definition of the terms is what causes him the problem, because they fit

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in the world, however great, can help believing a million things on trust from others or assuming the truth of many things besides those he has proved.” Positivism was the conventional wisdom of scholarly inquiry during the 20th century; and for most historical researchers, examining its foundations would be like questioning every single breath one takes. So everybody must accept on faith many propositions. “It is true that any man accepting any opinion on truth from another puts his mind in bondage. But it is a salutary bondage, which allows him to make good use of freedom.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 434. Vogel takes his epistemological orientation on faith from a tradition that includes Comte, Mill, Ayer, Mach, and McMurrin; and because Vogel suffers from conceptual confusion he ends up being a *Converso* Positivist; his mystification about positivism is ideologically useful to him. Bringing that belief system into question is a painful process if the best answer one can offer to that questioning is to deny the tradition so fundamental to the dogma to which one is in bondage. The cognitive dissonance caused by consciously denying positivism at the same time one unwittingly relies so fundamentally on its claims to support one’s ideological position must be unsettling.

168 Dan Vogel, “Sgoffing at Positivism,” *Mild-Mannered Musings: A Miscellaneous Collection of Musings on Theology, Philosophy, Science, History, and Sacred Texts*. 17 Mar. 2010 2:53 p.m. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://chris Carrollsmith.blogspot.com/2009/09/sgoffing-at-positivism.html>>.

so squarely within the mainstream of a discredited positivism that he now wants to distance himself from; definitions have consequences, and it is Vogel's definitions of evidence, of objectivity, of subjectivity that are the issues, because his historical claims are so straightforwardly within positivistic conventions: "Objective knowledge, according to the positivist, is verifiable, and typified by scientific knowledge. It is of two types—empirical propositions, and analytical propositions." For positivists, ethical and religious claims don't measure up to valid knowledge; "being merely subjective in nature, they represent no more than the feelings or emotions of the persons who express them."<sup>169</sup> Vogel's initial comments on Chris Smith's blog site assert that he just doesn't care about defining terms, and that there is something perverse with my "umbrella" definition of positivism (Vogel somehow believes my classifications of positivism are both "highly specialized" and "umbrella" definitions, the latter implying too broad, the former implying excessively narrow; even Vogel's metaphors are contradictory): "Given Alan's 'umbrella' definition of positivism, I think it impossible for anyone except a thoroughgoing relativist to avoid his label. For those between the extremes of relativism and positivism—the fundamentalists, as Alan calls them—there is bound to be a mix of traits. Alan implies that he is also in the middle, and so I might suggest that he is just better at hiding his positivism. But for Alan, apparently, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. In my view, it's a waste of time arguing about the definition of words. I'd rather talk about specific arguments and evidence in terms of strengths and weaknesses—not in terms of proof or verification."<sup>170</sup> I should note that I am

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169 Douglas Walton, *Ethical Argumentation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003), 240.

170 Dan Vogel, "Sgoffing at Positivism," *Mild-Mannered Musings: A Miscellaneous Collection of Musings on Theology, Philosophy, Science, History, and Sacred Texts*. 17 Mar. 2010 1:51 p.m. 24 Mar. 2012. <<http://chrisrollsmith.blogspot.com/2009/09/sgoffing-at-positivism.html>>. Even though he dismisses

working within the published confines of disciplinary practice when I define positivism. It is Vogel's definitions that are weird and skewed, the result of ignorance of the relevant disciplinary discussions and ideologically inflected to avoid the problem of being labeled positivistic while enabling him and ideological allies to still make positivistic assertions. Of course, Vogel's argument is sheer nonsense, and I have exhausted my ten-year supply of patience with it; I am determined now to speak and write bluntly, because diplomatic language couched in the obliqueness and euphemism of the academy have done nothing to stem the tsunami of ignorance about positivism in Mormon studies, in Mormon history, and in Dan Vogel's denials. It is time for forthrightness when work doesn't measure up to the standards of academic scholarship. Lots of people avoid making positivistic arguments,<sup>171</sup> and only Vogel's false

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definitions of terms as waste of time, Vogel spends an awful lot of time defining when he thinks it is in his interest. Definition of key terms is crucial if one is to be critical. To say that it is better to define evidence in terms of strengths and weaknesses instead of proof and verification is just another way of defining terms. But Vogel has the right impression here—that using terms such as *proof* and *verification* is one indication of positivism; and if he wants to shift away from talking in positivistic terms about verification and proof to some looser notion of strengths and weaknesses of arguments, I think that would be useful to stop using positivistic phraseology (passages I have quoted from Vogel show how often in the past he referred to what he was doing historically as testing and verifying; now Vogel seems reluctant to talk in such positivistic terms). And Vogel himself used to write persistently about verification of empirical evidence, so this change in rhetoric and method represents a major reversal for Vogel. I have baked bread; my experience tells me that a little yeast does indeed leaven the whole loaf, so Vogel gets that one assessment right about what I believe; even a small amount of a powerful agent such as a positivistic epistemology can leaven an entire batch of loaves.

171 In fact, to see an interesting and fruitful epistemological account by a Latter-day Saint who moves beyond the sterile debate between modernism/positivism versus relativism (both are futile because they are the flip side of each other's counterfeit coin), see James E. Faulconer's essay "Scripture as Incarnation," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 151–202. See also Faulconer's essay "Truth, Virtue, and Perspectivism," in *Virtue and the Abundant Life*, ed. Lloyd D. Newell, Terrance D. Olson, Emily

dichotomy between positivism and relativism makes such an absurd claim possible. It is again Vogel's ignorance of how the word *positivism* is used by the philosophically informed that makes such a claim plausible to him. Vogel doesn't care to focus on definitions when they work to his disadvantage; earlier in his Liberty Pages argument, Vogel did care to argue "about the definition of words," even though he did so unaware of the way the terms are used in the relevant literatures.

Since all disciplines (even history) have been theorized over the past three decades, it has been necessary for practitioners to become philosophically capable. As Hans Kellner notes about most historical practitioners, "Historians operate on the basis of 'tacit knowledge' that they rarely make explicit to themselves,"<sup>172</sup> so the vast majority of historians have resisted or denied the duty to become philosophically sophisticated, and being theoretically informed would automatically mean the renunciation of positivism in both word and deed in our post-positivistic era. These historians pay a high price in credibility because their argument rests on a tacit knowledge that in almost all instances is a taken-for-granted version of positivism. As Frank Ankersmit states when interviewed in the same volume, historians have a strong aversion to theoretical work, and much to the discipline's detriment, "history is the only discipline that has successfully resisted all attempts to introduce theory."<sup>173</sup> The price of philosophical incompetence is the inability to give an adequate account of what the

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M. Reynolds, and Richard N. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2012), 65–89. Both of these essays easily avoid anything approaching positivism while building an epistemology not incompatible with the Restoration. If Vogel's writings demonstrate the worst possible way to approach epistemological issues, Faulconer's writings demonstrate the best approach.

172 Ewa Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1998), 41.

173 Domańska, *Encounters*, 84–85.

historian or biographer is doing in a particular circumstance; consequently, historians tend to fall back on the tacit positivism they imbibed in graduate school or from the prevailing ethos of the discipline as a whole if they didn't attend graduate school.<sup>174</sup> And yet, philosophical competence is required of any would-be historian, because "all historical writing is inevitably theoretical," and "all historical writing inevitably entails taking a stand on key theoretical issues, whether or not the historian is aware of these—and many practicing historians are not. There is no escape from having a theoretical position, whether explicit or implicit."<sup>175</sup> So when Vogel fulminates against my "esoteric and irrelevant" epistemological inquiries, he is out of step with the expanding group of theoretically informed historians who insist that philosophical issues are foundational, prior to issues about sources, archives, or evidence. Philosophical issues have to be resolved (whether by presumption or argumentation) before the interpretation of sources, archives or evidence can begin and always proceed concurrently with the source work of the historian. Even historians who claim to have no philosophy, no theory, implicitly operate within one they have given no thought to.<sup>176</sup> If any researcher, such as Vogel, believes epistemology is "esoteric and irrelevant," that person is uncritical about the operative epistemology, because "even the most willfully 'a-theoretical' historians actually operate—and have to operate—within a framework of theoretical

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174 The rising generation of Mormon historians and historians of religion in general are more theoretically sophisticated, so they largely know the futility of investing in an implicit positivistic historiography. Generational change will largely eliminate the positivism that still dominates the New Mormon History or whatever remains of it. In fact, because of Vogel's lack of graduate training in history, he is more likely to make rhetorical appeals to what he believes the historical profession takes for granted in attempting to position himself inside its mainstream.

175 Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, ix.

176 Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, 4.

assumptions and strategies.”<sup>177</sup> So there is considerable irony that Vogel is unaware of and uncritical about the epistemology that guides his historical interpretations at the same time he declares deliberation on the topic “esoteric and irrelevant.” If someone is unaware of his or her epistemology, positivistic or otherwise, that person can’t be critical or reasoned about it. Researchers who, because they are maladroit at epistemology, declare epistemological inquiry “esoteric and irrelevant,” have neglected their duty to be informed, because “historians cannot even begin work, or, more precisely, begin to determine the object of their inquiries, without some form of analytical framework which construes the subject to be investigated.”<sup>178</sup>

Vogel may think discussion of philosophical issues is “esoteric and irrelevant,” but an increasing number of historians assert the need to develop theoretical competence as part of professional historical training. Nancy Partner posits that even many historians who have acquired some philosophical training have merely filtered off a few simple lessons about the theoretical positions without acquiring the necessary depth about how it impacts historiography and the subspecialties in history.<sup>179</sup> Vogel has shown broad incompetence when taking up epistemological issues, and this inability to theorize adequately is representative of the larger historical profession (although taken to a *reductio ad absurdum* by Vogel). “It is fair to say that history is an undertheorized discipline, its practitioners not generally concerned to explore the methodological foundations of their subject. Recently, this has changed,”<sup>180</sup> and that change brings with it the expectation that historians

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177 Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, 4.

178 Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, 86.

179 Nancy F. Partner, “Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions,” *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 35.

180 Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History*, 1. Let me note that Davies generally sees empiricism and positivism to be opposed to each other but he does



be philosophically informed. An uncritical empiricism has been the accepted philosophy of the historical profession until recently, unchallenged because of a near-universal consensus among the practitioners. “Consequently, many historians have denied that there is a theory behind what they do: instead, professional practices are defended on the grounds that they are common sense, that is, self-evidently correct.”<sup>181</sup> Other historians have justified their neglect of epistemology as a necessary element of doing history: “This deliberate avoidance of theoretical speculation is cheerfully acknowledged by many historians. Far from trying to disguise it, they maintain that a preoccupation with the principles of historical study can actually prove an obstacle to scholarly creativity.”<sup>182</sup> Vogel declines to do epistemology himself—he dismisses the need to do so—while, ironically, making bold declarations about epistemological issues. Peter Novick notes about his own book that he will spend a good deal of time “talking about what historians do worst, or at least badly; reflecting on epistemology.”<sup>183</sup> Not much has changed in the past two decades since the book was published; theoretical reflection by historians is done by a small, but increasingly sophisticated, segment of the historical profession, and that situation will almost certainly be turned

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note intellectual circumstances in which positivism is a subset of empiricism (35–38).

181 Davies, *Empiricism*, 2.

182 Theodore S. Hamerow, *Reflections on History and Historians* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987), 207. Citing Joseph R. Strayer, who justified neglecting philosophical issues because history is more art than science and artists are never asked to explain how their work produces knowledge, Hamerow notes the charming attitude this represents among average historians: “How long the historical profession will be able to go on dodging problems of epistemology, however, is an open question” (208). I think we have an answer: historians can no longer disregard the issue; the theorizing of the profession began forty years ago. Dodging problems of epistemology is now viewed as culpable and scandalous among the minority of historians who are aware of theoretical developments.

183 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1988), 15.

around only by generational change. Even if the historical researcher doesn't make his or her theory explicit, a theory still operates, yet hidden even from the researcher: "History as a study of society cannot proceed without theory." Green also notes historians' reluctance to articulate their own theory: "No large body of scholars has been more immune to the theoretical properties of their discipline than historians."<sup>184</sup>

I don't like the division of labor in these discussions of positivism with Dan Vogel: I spend hundreds of hours finding thousands of books and articles in order to present the most informed possible position on positivism, and Vogel never cites a single source but merely makes stuff up, including bizarre definitions of the term, while contemptuously denying the need to be philosophically aware. Of all the philosophies out there today, positivism is one of the simplest to understand. It is nowhere near as complex as understanding Derrida, Heidegger, Marion, Badiou, or Foucault.<sup>185</sup> And Vogel can't grasp the simplest philosophy in the history of the pursuit; it is dishonest to know that whole bodies of literature exist that directly controvert his position, while he never engages or

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<sup>184</sup> William A. Green, *History, Historians, and the Dynamics of Change* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 7.

<sup>185</sup> Take, for example, concepts of truth. As the deficiencies of the correspondence theory of truth (I assume it is uncontroversial that an almost universal overlap exists between positivists and those who believe in a correspondence theory; that is, almost all positivists also adhere to a simple correspondence view) have become more evident, a productive discussion about a replacement notion of truth has been going on. The best candidate to replace that outmoded version of modern thought is Heidegger's definition of truth as *alêtheia*, as "unconcealment." Chapter 5 of Robert Eaglestone's *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* takes the issue up in a discussion of truth in history. Eaglestone there notes that "truth as correspondence is well established and is taken for granted, perhaps in an unreflective way, in most work done in history and historiography" (142). Mark A. Wrathall takes up a more philosophical examination of the concept in *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2011). If a writer can't comprehend simple ideas such as those advanced by positivism, how will that writer take up complicated ones, such as a Heideggerian notion of truth?

acknowledges them.<sup>186</sup> I have referred to these sources in my previous criticisms of Vogel and others who operate at the center and periphery of the New Mormon History, so it is impossible that Vogel is unaware that a literature contrary to his position is out there to be engaged (Vogel refers to the essays in which I cite the sources; and each time I publish another criticism of Vogel, I largely use sources I haven't previously cited in order to show the vast bulk of the discourse that Vogel entirely ignores). Awareness of the historiographical literature, the philosophical literature, the literature of the various disciplines demands that those who openly deny positivism but practice it covertly need to recognize the death of the philosophy and move into the twenty-first century. "Although it is becoming fashionable today, particularly in philosophical circles, to speak about the death of positivism, we should recognize its rather formidable impact upon nineteenth and twentieth-century modes of thought." Positivism was so authoritative that it continues to exert a powerful influence even over those who reject it.<sup>187</sup> Recognition of the death of positivism will come painfully for its adherents, but will still be considered a mercy killing. George Steinmetz says in the introduction to the book *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences* that positivism has this surprising life span in the social sciences, "especially

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186 I know it is difficult for historians to give up generations of thought on doing philosophy; historians have always quite proudly announced that they "don't do metaphysics but leave that to philosophers, theologians, and poets." But recent discussion points out that everybody does metaphysics, whether or not they are aware they are doing so. Those who work in the province of Mormon history will just have to adjust to the requirement that they be capable of engaging competently in philosophical exchange. In book reviews, historians have always used the primary sources as the mainstay in denting each others' credibility; they assert that the study under review depends too much on secondary sources. In the future, undertheorized historical works will be dinged for not engaging theoretical concepts sufficiently in a way that primary sources are used today to diminish a historian's credibility.

187 Calvin O. Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue U P, 1980), 86.

in latent, unexamined, or unconscious forms.”<sup>188</sup> This is the argument I am making for Vogel’s historical enterprises: his guiding epistemology is positivistic, but his ideological commitments don’t permit him to admit that influence, so his positivism is invisible to himself but fairly obvious to those who don’t share the allegiance. “Despite repeated attempts by social theorists and researchers to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire, the disciplines continue to experience a positivistic haunting.”<sup>189</sup> As is the case with those positivists working in the Mormon historical tradition, identifying positivists is made difficult by the fact that “social scientists designated as working in a positivist way often refuse this description of their work. Raymond Williams once remarked that positivism has become ‘a swear-word, by which nobody is swearing.’”<sup>190</sup> Positivism is still robust in disciplines such as history and the social sciences, even though it is too often denied, misrecognized, and disguised by its proponents.<sup>191</sup> What Steinmetz says about the social sciences in America is true a fortiori in the field of Mormon history: “positivism is still an important folk category among social scientists,”<sup>192</sup> especially those insufficiently adept at philosophy to recognize the situation. The ghost of positivism is omnipresent in historical studies, especially studies of religion. “Positivism is often said to be dead, supplanted by philosophical naturalism, one might suppose; but if it is dead, its ghost lingers ubiquitously and its empiricistic and verificationist offspring are often seen.”<sup>193</sup>

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188 George Steinmetz, “Introduction: Positivism and Its Others in the Social Sciences,” *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham: Duke U P, 2005), 3.

189 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 3.

190 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 29.

191 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 30.

192 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 30.

193 Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (New York: Oxford U P, 2011), 182.

Some kind of exorcism of the ghost of positivism must be attempted before progress is possible in moving beyond the notion. Simple denial is not a reasonable alternative to knowing about positivism, because that simplistic denial results in the continuation of positivistic assumptions rather than their examination.

Additionally, allowing that positivism aimed its most potent guns at religious belief when it held the high ground during the twentieth century, as positivism went into rapid retreat over the past few decades, it abandoned trench line after trench line. Some of that territory ought to be ceded back to religious belief because it was taken illegitimately by using weapons such as the verifiability criterion. "Like Thucydides, modern historians have eschewed the gods as part of the landscape of objects with which they needed to deal. Too often, they offered only neglect or some form of reductionism or contempt when something needed saying."<sup>194</sup> A researcher can argue that positivism was illicit, but its fruits merited only through logical gymnastics. The reductive empiricism of Vogel's position ought to be exposed for what it is: one religious belief upbraiding another for not living up to its own particular criteria of truth (and one that it doesn't adhere to itself). Vogel, and his supporters, have never turned a critical gaze on their own presuppositions and ideologies. Jon Levenson, a biblical critic, makes a crucial point about the larger study of religion as it usually emerges from the academy's institutions and practices: he says of Elaine Pagel's *The Origin of Satan* that the study "nicely reflects how the academic method known as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is usually applied in religion departments and divinity schools today. What gets 'suspected' is principally traditional religious belief, never the (unexamined) beliefs of those doing the

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194 David Gary Shaw, "Modernity between Us and Them: The Place of Religion within History," *History and Theory* 45 (Dec. 2006): 2.

suspecting.”<sup>195</sup> We should add history to that list of academic courses of study that too often apply an uncritical anti-religious ideology to the subject.

An inarticulate positivism still dominates the study of things Mormon by too many historians and researchers who came after (even before) the New Mormon History (the only notable exception among historians is Richard Bushman; that is why Bushman isn't a New Mormon Historian—he isn't a positivist). “If positivism is philosophically ‘dead,’ it survives and kicks in the sciences—as a current of thought in the natural sciences, and as considerably more than that in many of the human ones.”<sup>196</sup> Once one becomes philosophically aware, then positivism seems less and less plausible. But one must first be aware of what positivism is before the wounds it has inflicted can begin healing. When Samuel Beckett was asked what life would be like after death, he stated that “in hell, we'll sit around talking about the good old days, when we wished we were dead.”<sup>197</sup> Although the walking dead who still adhere to some variety of positivism don't know it yet, the immediate future will bring a time when they will sit around nostalgically at Sunstone Symposia and Mormon History Association conferences wistfully recalling the time when Mormon historians and their fellow travelers could without irony and in complete innocence talk about objectivity and brute empirical facts. The period during which positivism was dominant in the social sciences and history was a long sleep of reason that can lead to a resurrection of a more humble concept of reason and evidence; and we should praise the death of positivism and the rebirth of a more chastened and realistic rationality, but that

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195 Jon D. Levenson, “The Devil in the Details,” *Commentary* 100.3 (Sep. 1995): 56.

196 Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, 229.

197 Louis Menand, “Dangers Within and Without,” *Profession* 2005 (2005): 16.

would be to believe in the resurrection of the dead, and we all know how the naturalistic philosophers on Mars Hill reacted to Paul when he first mentioned the resurrection of a dead body (Acts 14). The more likely conclusion is that positivism will have to be overthrown rather than resuscitated.

I have previously cited Vogel and a coauthor urging a "more sensitive, responsible scholarship as well as a more honest faith"<sup>198</sup> in the writing of Mormon history. That goal can never be accomplished until a more honest and responsible theoretical understanding of historiography also becomes an aspiration, and recent intellectual history (including developments in historiography over the past few decades) is taken into account. Vogel never acknowledges the huge theoretical literature that shows the identity between his own claims and the history of positivism. Vogel's positivism is now disreputable; ignoring and denying the correspondence between his uninformed assertions and the appropriate literature undermines any drive toward that more honest and up-to-date history. No discussion could be more relevant to Vogel's historical writings than an epistemological examination of positivism, because his words, phrases, claims, and arguments fit so precisely within the positivistic tradition. To keep the focus narrow in this essay and reduce the length, I have omitted references to the many positivistic claims made by New Mormon Historians and others working in the Mormon revisionist tradition; I have previously published criticisms of those writers,<sup>199</sup> and those

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198 Vogel and Metcalfe, "Joseph Smith's Scriptural Cosmology," 212.

199 Alan Goff, "Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History." In *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7.1 (1995): 170–207. Alan Goff, "Historical Narrative, Literary Narrative." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5.1 (Spring 1996): 50–102. Alan Goff, "The Mormon Positivismstreit: Modern vs. Postmodern Approaches to Telling the Story of Mormonism" in the Proceedings of the 2002 Symposium of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History volume called *Telling the Story of Mormon History*, William G. Hartley, ed. (Provo, UT: Smith Institute, 2004), 49–64. Alan Goff, "Dan Vogel's Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family

synoptic essays can provide a broad view of the situation. But it is also helpful to focus in a detailed way on just one Positivism Denier, as I have done here (well, two, including Christopher Smith, who isn't a positivist but is a Positivism Denier) as a case study. Just as the intellectual framework of those who write about Mormon history depends on an uncritical and unexamined positivism, the same is true of the historical profession at large. The difference is that among historians generally there is a small body of theoretically informed and philosophically sophisticated historians who have criticized this positivistic orientation to the extent that historians know that they don't want to be called positivists, even if they don't yet know how to stop making positivistic assertions. A more honest historiography requires a thorough defense of that positivism if historians aren't going to abandon it. Rather than be in denial, Vogel could mount an epistemological argument for his claims about empirical assertions and subjective evidence, his positivistic claims.<sup>200</sup>

Denying that you advance positivistic arguments isn't enough; you must no longer assert them, and you must acknowledge that you made them in the past but have had a change of heart and mind. Uncritical historical researchers may not have heard the wild man assert that "Positivism is dead, and we have killed him,"<sup>201</sup> but they must have some inkling of the end from having embraced the cadaver for so long. The grieving and lamentation stage is delayed only by the denial. We have found the corpse, and its decomposing parts

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Allegory." In *FARMS Review* 17.2 (2005): 321–400. Alan Goff, "Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book of Mormon Production." In *FARMS Review* 16.1 (2004): 11–36.

200 I would welcome a philosophical defense from the ground up of positivism, but let us keep in mind that really good minds have failed to mount a credible justification of positivism over the past few decades. It is now a defunct intellectual tradition bereft of intellectual credibility, but with lots of acolytes.

201 Although Popper claims to have done it singlehandedly.



are scattered across a number of disciplines, but the largest convocation of worms is archived in Mormon history.

In the historical vignette I sketched at the beginning of this essay, Dan Vogel is Hiroo Onoda: a long holdout defending positivism but in deep denial and hiding in the jungles of the past, not knowing that the positivistic claims he asserts are no longer defensible, more than thirty years out of date. For Vogel and Smith, my assertion that Vogel is a positivist is a moral claim they are certain is false, for to them positivism is less an epistemological position and more a moral statement. To be called a positivist is a very bad thing, but to *be* a positivist even worse, something akin to a moral failing. That Vogel is a positivist isn't a moral fault, but the fact that he doesn't know that he is one is the ethical shortcoming, for one can't imagine a justification for this ignorance about the meaning of the philosophy. As Jonathan Haidt demonstrates in his *The Righteous Mind*, moral intuitions come first in human thought and strategic reasoning second (the Enlightenment heritage mistakenly insists that reason comes first and is somehow free of emotions and moral commitments). Smith and Vogel assert the moral position that nobody they agree with could end up such an execrable character as to be a positivist, so their inner lawyer, their strategic reasoning, kicks in to explain how Vogel's arguments may shadow precisely positivistic claims from three decades ago, but the assertions really mean something other than what they say. In my historical analogy, Vogel is Onoda, still holding out in an intellectual war that was lost decades ago. One can't help but admire tenacity and loyalty, even to bankrupt ideas; however, loyalty exaggerated or to a bad cause becomes stubbornness and recalcitrance. Smith could have played the parts of Suzuki and Major Taniguchi in this morality play, helping to ease Onoda/Vogel back into the real world of ideas as they currently exist. Suzuki/Smith could do the service of bringing Vogel from the depths gradually so

he doesn't suffer from the bends (to mix metaphors); I have been attempting that feat for a decade now, but Vogel merely dismisses my leaflets as propaganda, no matter how many historiography and philosophy of history sources I cite, no matter how often I resort to the historiographical literature that he as a self-identified historian is more responsible to know than I, as a literary critic, am. As much as I say, "Stand down soldier and come down from the mountain; yours is a cause lost long ago," Vogel/Onoda won't listen to me. No matter how many times I take up the bullhorn, Vogel always posts another claim on the Signature Books website (doesn't Signature have any editorial standards for the claims that are made under its imprimatur? thus converting their website into the equivalent of an online edition of a newspaper where anyone with a groundless opinion can leave behind uninformed but adamant arguments if the ideological positions agree with Signature's) asserting obsessively that positivism is something entirely different from his interpretive scheme, and it is an act of meanness to refer to him as a positivist. His commanding officer will have to be brought in before he turns over his sword and rifle; it doesn't help the situation that the officer is himself suffering from some of the same disconnect from the larger world of ideas (at least in Onoda's case, Major Taniguchi had moved on and was no longer an army officer but living back in Japan as a bookseller). Accommodation to contemporary historiography can be painful and vertiginous for those caught in a historical time warp, but it is still necessary, and much more comfortable than living off the land, reconnoitering the enemy (even if they are just fishermen and farmers going about quotidian pursuits), hoping eschatologically that your army will someday return as promised so you can prove valuable in victory. These are the delusions of the vanquished and the uninformed.

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