



Jens Zimmermann

# HERMENEUTICS

A Very Short Introduction

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# Preface

This book is designed to accomplish two things. The first aim is to introduce the non-specialist reader to the idea of hermeneutics as a philosophical school of thought. To familiarize the reader with the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics, I have sketched its historical origins, presented its most important thinkers, and outlined its main claims. The second aim is to show that hermeneutics is a defining trait of our humanity and is foundational to every field of human knowledge. To this end, I have traced the intrinsic role interpretation plays in philosophy, theology, art, law, and science.

Writing a short—indeed *very* short—introduction requires selection, and selection necessitates exclusion. My choice to show how hermeneutics works meant neglecting some theoretical issues and debates in favour of interpretive practices and concrete examples. Thus the reader familiar with hermeneutics will miss some standard critiques of hermeneutics by Emilio Betti, Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur, or the (mis)appropriation of hermeneutics for pragmatism by Richard Rorty. Instead, I chose to include the broader summary criticism that hermeneutics entails relativism. Those interested in a brief overview of the main philosophical debates about hermeneutics should consult the Appendix, which is written in a more condensed, academic style than the rest of the book. In addition,

the Further reading section will direct interested readers to two very good, more conventional introductions to philosophical hermeneutics.

My decision to focus on the practical implications of hermeneutics also influenced topical choices within each knowledge discipline. Thus in theology, for example, I omitted debates between philosophy and theology to focus instead on the connection between theories of inspiration and the nature of the text, which determine interpretive practices. For the same reason, in the law chapter, I have chosen to focus on practical interpretive issues drawn from broader public debates rather than focus on exchanges between legal philosophers. When writing this book, I had in mind both interested general readers who have never heard of hermeneutics, and those of my academic colleagues who are looking for an introductory text that will help their students grasp the essential nature and claims of hermeneutics. Consultation with both general readers and colleagues was essential to the writing of this book.

I dedicate this book to my wife Sabine, whose patient reading, merciless cutting, and constructive criticism greatly improved its quality. I also owe much thanks to Jean Grondin, John Behr, Stephen Dunning, and Robert Doede for commenting on the manuscript. The Very Short Introduction editorial team and external readers were also extremely helpful in shaping this introduction to hermeneutics. All remaining faults are, as always, the author's responsibility.

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# Chapter 1

## What is hermeneutics?

What is hermeneutics? A simple answer is that it means interpretation. Interpretation occurs in many fields of study and also in day-to-day life. We interpret plays, novels, abstract art, music and movies, employment contracts, the law, the Bible, the Quran, and other sacred texts; but we also interpret the actions of our friends and enemies, or try to figure out what a job termination means in the context of our life story. How and why do we interpret? The goal of interpretation is to make sense of a text or situation, to understand what they mean. This seems to imply that interpretation only becomes necessary when we do not understand something right away. Indeed, the need for interpretation appears more obvious in some cases than in others. For example, most people would agree that plays, novels, legal statutes, and religious texts require interpretation, although some fundamentalists like to affirm the utter clarity of religious texts. We also accept that the Supreme Court interprets the constitution.

Yet in other areas of life, the need for interpretation is less obvious. When you see a red traffic light and stop, is this an interpretation? When a scientist reports on her research, does she just explain what happens in nature or does she interpret nature? Is interpretation—hermeneutics that is—necessary only when misunderstanding requires a special effort on our part to clarify