

Jens Zimmermann

HERMENEUTICS

A Very Short Introduction

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ISBN 978-0-19-968535-6

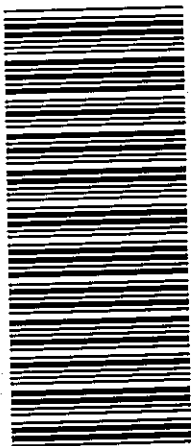


9 780199 685356

£7.99 FRP \$11.95 USA

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HERMENEUTICS

A Very Short Introduction

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Every day, we decipher the meaning of newspaper articles, books, political speeches, emails, and even dinner conversations. But what constitutes the process of interpretation? And how do we draw meaning from the world around us so that we might understand our position in it?

In this *Very Short Introduction*, Jens Zimmermann introduces the reader to the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation. Tracing the history of hermeneutic theory, he sets out its key elements and shows how they can be applied to a broad range of disciplines: theology, literature, law, the natural and the human sciences. Demonstrating the longstanding and wide-ranging necessity of interpretation, Zimmermann reveals

hermeneutics' central significance for today's social, cultural, political and religious life.

an original idea. Snappy, small format, stylish design - perfect to pop into your pocket for spare moments.
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Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction

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'Zimmermann offers one of the best short introductions to modern hermeneutics. The writing is at all times concise, clear and engaging. The author brilliantly evaluates the riches of this major intellectual tradition as well as revealing its ongoing creative influence on contemporary thought.'

Richard Kearney, Charles Seelig Professor at
Boston College and author of *Anatheism*
and *Carnal Hermeneutics*

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
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First edition published in 2015

Impression: 3

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015939572

ISBN 978-0-19-968535-6

Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

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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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