

## INTRODUCTION TO INTERPRETATION

### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

If you walk along the aisles of any major university library, you are likely to notice that its shelves hold many more books *on* the important thinkers of the past than those thinkers *themselves* have written. Plato is an obvious example: throughout the centuries thousands of scholars have offered their understanding – their interpretation – of what Plato said in the handful of texts he actually wrote.

But what is interpretation and do we really need it? Does not a text simply say what it says, so that if we read it and do not understand it, this simply reflects a failing on our part? Or is there a more troubling dimension to every text so that interpretation is always needed in order to arrive at its meaning?

This course seeks to demonstrate that interpretation is always being used whenever we sit down and begin engaging with a 'text' – a term broadly used to encompass all forms of writing (from the lofty philosophical book to the twitter message) and every form of the spoken word (from the formal Presidential Address to the casual conversation). If this is the case, the act of reading and listening may be much more complex than we first suspect. In this course students will be introduced to scholarly traditions and major thinkers who have recognized this complexity and who have further theorized what are often strikingly different interpretive approaches to texts.

It is hoped that through an exploration of these approaches students will begin to appreciate how the interpretive endeavor is foundational to the work done by scholars not only in the Humanities but in any academic field that engages with texts.

### REQUIRED TEXT:

Porter, Stanley E. and Robinson, Jason C. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011)

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION:

The required text has been selected to provide an introductory background on weekly topics. But while students are certainly expected to have read the required readings\* prior to each class, the exams do not specifically target these readings; rather, they are designed to assess the students' understanding of the lectures and discussions which take place in the classroom.

\*Note that some required readings are applicable for more than a single week and are thus listed across multiple weeks. So the overall reading requirement for this course (approximately 160 pages) is less than it may first appear.

First exam	30%
Second exam	30%
Third exam	40%

## OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:

**Week 1:** Introduction

### I HERMENEUTICS

**Week 2:** The Origins of Hermeneutics (12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> c.)

**Week 3:** Romantic Hermeneutics (19<sup>th</sup> c.)

**Week 4:** Modern Hermeneutics (20<sup>th</sup> c. to present)

### II. PHENOMENOLOGY

**Week 5:** The Origins of Phenomenology (early 20<sup>th</sup> c.)

**Week 6:** The Marriage of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology (1927)

**Week 7:** Hermeneutical Phenomenology in Theology (1927 to 1960)

**Week 8:** Hermeneutical Phenomenology in the Secular World (1960 to present)

### III. (POST)STRUCTURALISM

**Week 9:** The Origins of (Post)Structuralism (1916)

**Week 10:** Structuralism (1916 to 1960s)

**Week 11:** Post-Structuralism (1960s to present)

**Week 12:** Post-Structuralism (1960s to present)

## COURSE DETAILS WEEK-BY-WEEK:

**Week 1:** Introduction

- discussion of the syllabus, overview of course material, expectations
- opening discussion of the difficulty of texts and the need for their interpretation

### I. HERMENEUTICS

**Week 2:** The Origins of Hermeneutics (12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> c.)

Hermeneutics is defined as the rules, methods and theory governing the analysis of texts. It first arises as a distinct discipline in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and is closely linked with the Protestant Reformation. But the interpretation of Scripture, legal documents and literature each enjoyed its own separate history until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chladenius and Ast are two key figures to be examined.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 1-7)

### **Week 3: Romantic Hermeneutics (19<sup>th</sup> c.)**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Schleiermacher recognizes that our understanding of a text moves in a seemingly endless and inescapable circle, the famous 'hermeneutical circle:' the meaning of any part of a text is dependent on its contextual whole, while the meaning of that whole is accessible only through the parts. This allows him to treat the interpretation of Scripture, legal documents and literature in a similar fashion and he is accordingly credited as the first to provide us a general hermeneutical model. At the end of the century, Dilthey expands the scope of this model to include the 'text' of human life itself and in doing so he becomes the first to establish the human sciences (the humanities) as a distinct discipline from the natural sciences.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 7-8)

Chapter 2: Hermeneutics and New Foundations: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey (pp. 23-47)

### **Week 4: Modern Hermeneutics (20<sup>th</sup> c. to present)**

It is often remarked that the only truly new philosophy to emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the one which Heidegger established. In terms of hermeneutics and phenomenology (to be examined in Weeks 5-8), this is certainly the case. His crossing of these two fields in 1927 into what is known as 'hermeneutical phenomenology' spawned many hermeneuts eager to apply this new understanding to Scripture (Bultmann and Ebeling), or else to develop it in a more secular direction (Gadamer and Ricoeur). But equally, there are many hermeneuts vehemently opposed to this technique who wish instead to return to the way texts were generally interpreted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Betti and Hirsch).

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 8-13)

Chapter 4: Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics (pp. 74-104)

Chapter 5: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology (pp. 105-130)

## **II. PHENOMENOLOGY**

### **Week 5: The Origins of Phenomenology (early 20<sup>th</sup> c.)**

In 1900-1, Husserl publishes a book that effectively establishes a new research method. By focusing on the way objects *appear* to us, phenomenology allows an even better break with the natural scientific approach of examining the external world. Interpreters are now asked to reflect on their *experience* of the text rather than thinking of it as an object which is entirely independent of them. New questions which now arise for humanities scholars include: 'Has the text successfully acted as a conduit between the consciousness of its author and our own consciousnesses as readers?' and 'How do we, as readers, participate in producing the meaning of the text?'

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 8-10)

Chapter 3: Phenomenology and Existential Hermeneutics: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (pp. 48-73)

### **Week 6: The Marriage of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology (1927)**

In 1927, Husserl's student Heidegger publishes a book profoundly critiquing his former teacher. He accomplishes this by crossing phenomenology with hermeneutics and this effectively gives birth to the hermeneutical phenomenological approach which has so characterized 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretation. Scholars are now asked to refrain from thinking of themselves as external to texts so that some interpretative technique must be used to bridge the gap. Instead, reading texts must be experienced as that which discloses our meaningful relation to the world. Among other things, this implies anyone viewing the hermeneutical circle as a vicious circle need not worry, for a true experience of the world comes when we orient ourselves to this circle properly.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 8-10)

Chapter 3: Phenomenology and Existential Hermeneutics: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (pp. 48-73)

### **Week 7: Hermeneutical Phenomenology in Theology (1927 to 1960)**

Bultmann and Ebeling are two Protestant theologians who approach Scripture in a hermeneutical phenomenological fashion. For them, recognizing the truth of the New Testament involves allowing its interpretation to be guided by the questions we put to it. Equally important is for the interpreter not to simply read but to 'listen' and attempt to 'hear' the proclamation of its Word, especially when spoken during the sermon. For these sacred texts are not to be thought of as dead letters in a book but as very much alive in that they confront us with a decision in the here-and-now and thus make us more responsible for the actual world in which we live.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 16-8)

Chapter 9: Dialectical Theology and Exegesis: Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann (pp. 226-39)

### **Week 8: Hermeneutical Phenomenology in the Secular World (1960 to present)**

It is largely Gadamer's publication from 1960 that placed hermeneutical phenomenology on the map. Along with the work of Ricoeur which equally sought to justify its applicability to any text and not just Scripture, their efforts made this new interpretive approach widely accessible to interpreters from all walks of life. However, not everyone was convinced that this was a desirable affair. Betti and Hirsch both feel that such an approach is disastrous, leaving interpretation to the personal whims of the interpreter and encouraging an 'anything goes' attitude. To combat this, they provide a set of objective standards to guide interpreters so as to better ensure the validity of their interpretations.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 10-12)

Chapter 4: Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics (pp. 74-104)

Chapter 5: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology (pp. 105-130)

### III. (POST)STRUCTURALISM

#### **Week 9: The Origins of (Post)Structuralism (1916)**

The series of lectures Saussure gave in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century eventually became the basis for an entirely new understanding of language called structuralism. In stark contrast to all previous methods, Saussure advises that the meaning of a text is best sought at the level of its structural form and not its content. So the interpreter should not primarily examine *what* the text says, but rather *how* it says it. The basic structural unit to be examined is what Saussure calls the 'sign.'

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 14-5)

Chapter 7: Structuralism and Daniel Patte (pp. 154-6)

#### **Week 10: Structuralism (1916 to 1960s)**

In the decades after Saussure, thinkers develop structuralism in many directions. One such thinker is Jakobson, whose communications model proves influential as it is highly useful for analyzing verbal exchanges. When two people come into *contact* with one another, Jakobson asks us to break it down into its parts: there is the *addresser* who sends a *message* to the *addressee* within a particular *context* using a particular *code*. Examining each of these five aspects and how they specifically function is said to better reveal to the interpreter the meaning of the verbal exchange.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 7: Structuralism and Daniel Patte (pp. 157-8)

#### **Week 11: Post-Structuralism (1960s to present)**

Beginning in the 1960s, structuralists began to see that despite their efforts to systematically proceed and impose structure on a text, its interpretation remains problematic. Of these post-structuralists (as they came to be called), Derrida is the most famous. He recognizes that the words we use often have unintended meanings, making an author's text highly unstable. The interpreter's task is to highlight this fact, how we cannot fix the text's meaning once and for all or even give all its possible meanings.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 15-6)

Chapter 8: Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction (pp. 190-213)

#### **Week 12: Post-Structuralism (1960s to present)**

Post-structuralist interpretive techniques have been applied to many diverse texts such as literature (Barthes) and documents which record the history of madness and human sexuality (Foucault). There is also the work of the psychoanalyst Lacan who holds that the unconscious is structured just like a language. So products of the unconscious, like our nightly dreams, can be interpreted like any other text and, conversely, every text has an unconscious desire discoverable through interpretation.

Required Reading:

*Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1: What is Hermeneutics? (pp. 15-6)

Chapter 8: Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction (pp. 190-213)