

## 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

meaning? This assumption seems plausible. After all, 'Hermeneutics' has often stood for a set of interpretive rules designed to clear up difficult textual passages. This book shows, however, that hermeneutics is more than the interpretive principles or methods we resort to when immediate comprehension fails us. Rather, hermeneutics is already unconsciously at work even when we grasp the obvious meaning of a red light. We will see that hermeneutics is the art of understanding and of making oneself understood. In this book, we will concentrate mostly on the art of understanding. One is engaged in hermeneutics whenever one tries to grasp the meaning of something—be it a conversation, a newspaper article, a Shakespeare play, or an account of past events. This book shows that the goal of hermeneutics is understanding, and that although understanding may be guided by analytical principles, it cannot be reduced to them. Understanding requires art rather than rule-governed science. For example, trying to understand why the girl you brought to the party dances with everyone but you involves a unique personal interpretive effort that goes beyond mere logical analysis and general interpretive principles.

We will also see that understanding is something that goes beyond what we nowadays call knowledge: the mere passing or receiving of information. Understanding is knowledge in the deeper sense of grasping not just facts but their integration into a meaningful whole. When you read the word 'breakable' on top of a moving box, why do you handle this box more carefully than other boxes, even though you do not know what is inside? It is because you immediately integrate the word into a meaningful whole that goes beyond mere information, beyond a mere linguistic analysis of the word 'breakable'. You interpret the word based on personal life experience and cultural understanding of property. Thus hermeneutics or interpretation refers to the sort of understanding by which we integrate facts into a meaningful whole, the kind of practical operation that provides knowledge in the sense of deep familiarity with something.

## The term *hermeneutics*

The word 'hermeneutics' comes from the ancient Greek language (*hermeneuein* = to utter, to explain, to translate), and was first used by thinkers who discussed how divine messages or mental ideas are expressed in human language. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE), for example, used the word *hermeneutics* in dealing with poets as 'hermeneuts of the divine', and his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE) wrote the first extant treatise on hermeneutics, in which he showed how spoken and written words were expressions of inner thoughts. Thus, from its very first appearance, the term *hermeneuein*, along with its later Latin equivalent 'interpretari', was associated with the task of understanding some kind of spoken or written communication.

The word *hermeneutics* has also been associated with the winged-messenger god, Hermes (see Figure 1). In Greek mythology, Hermes relays divine tidings to mortals. While there is little evidence for the still popular etymology that the word *hermeneutics* derives from Hermes, he nevertheless provides a useful emblem for our definition of hermeneutics. Interpretation does involve the deciphering of unclear messages. It is essentially an act of mediation, or translation, and Hermes, who was also described as an eloquent speaker and cunning trickster, represents the need for translation of difficult communications. Hermes reminds us that interpretation involves both grasping what someone has said (receiving a message) and making oneself understood (sending a message). In this book we will focus almost exclusively on the first aspect of receiving communications through texts. The divine figure of Hermes suggests that interpretation is driven by our desire to grasp the existential import of what we are trying to understand. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), an important figure for modern hermeneutics, put it, 'Hermes is the messenger of the gods. He brings the message of fate.' For Heidegger, hermeneutics was the



1. Hermes, messenger of the gods, as depicted on a Greek vase c.500–450 BCE. Hermes flies on winged boots, holding his herald's wand and wearing a traveller's cap and cloak.

kind of interpretation that listened for an important message or announcement of crucial importance. Heidegger's point is that interpretation is motivated by our personal interest and concern. Whether I read the Bible, an employment contract, or try to understand why my friend has not visited me in weeks, I want to know my 'fate', that is, what these texts and actions mean to me. Interpretation, in other words, is intrinsically guided by my present concerns, by the desire to hear an announcement that pertains to my own situation.

### Hermeneutics and the quest for self-understanding

From its inception in Greek antiquity, hermeneutics aimed to discover the truth about ourselves and the world we inhabit for the sake of wisdom. Especially in ancient times, philosophers argued that discoveries about the nature of things should enhance our understanding of who we are and how we should live our lives as human beings. They thought that all understanding is ultimately self-understanding. In his philosophical dialogues, for example, Plato taught that human knowledge is principally about self-understanding and moral formation. In Plato's dialogues, the figure of Socrates epitomizes this philosophical attitude. In Socrates' *Apology*, his self-defence during his trial for allegedly corrupting Athens' youth, Socrates proclaimed life's highest goal to be a soul perfected by wisdom and virtue through rational self-examination. 'An unexamined life,' he asserted, 'is not a human life.'

In contrast to our modern inclination to discount philosophy, religion, and poetry as sources of real knowledge, the ancient world considered them to be important carriers of moral ideals. Homer's poetry, for instance, was thought to teach courage and striving for excellence but also to warn against pride. Aristotle famously argued that poetry was more elevated than history because poems went beyond mere facts to imagine the purpose of human development and deduce universal moral truths. Poetry shared

this distinction with rhetoric, the art of persuasion, on the basis of cogent reasoning. Both Aristotle and Plato recognized the potential danger of rhetoric to degenerate into emotional pleading or verbal pyrotechnics to win an argument at the expense of truth. Even in the ancient world, it seems, there were lawyers who thrived on this malpractice. Generally, however, the ancients believed that rhetoric's true purpose was the attainment and teaching of deep truths about the human condition. One of the questions we will try to answer in this introduction to hermeneutics is why art, poetry, and rhetoric were regarded as important sources of knowledge in determining the human condition well into the 17th century, while many modern thinkers tend to exclude them.

### Hermeneutics as philosophical discipline

So far we have defined hermeneutics as a basic human activity of interpretation concerned with understanding the meaning of communications or life situations. The word 'hermeneutics', however, has a second meaning. It is also the name for the philosophical discipline concerned with analysing the conditions for understanding. Hermeneutic philosophers examine, for example, how our cultural traditions, our language, and our nature as historical beings make understanding possible. Philosophical hermeneutics has many antecedents but emerged as its own discipline in the 20th century with the publication of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's book, *Truth and Method* (1960), which was subtitled 'fundamental contours of a hermeneutic philosophy'. Gadamer developed his hermeneutic philosophy by interacting with a number of major figures in the history of hermeneutics we will also discuss in this book: Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Ricoeur.

It is important to make clear from the outset that philosophical hermeneutics is not a particular *theory* of knowledge. A theory seeks to isolate methods of interpretation in order to come up with

regulative principles that allow us to control the production of meaning. For example, a theory of legal interpretation will try to establish rules for the interpretation of legal texts. Similarly, a literary theory of interpretation, such as feminist theory or Marxist theory, will prescribe principles for regulating our reading of literary texts. In this sense, theories have a practical goal. No doubt, every field of knowledge, whether in the human or natural sciences, represents a certain mode of knowing, and thus follows a particular methodology that corresponds to its particular object of study. The philosophical discipline of hermeneutics, however, is not a method aiming at a specific practical goal or particular reading. Rather, hermeneutic philosophers are interested in understanding as such: how and under what conditions does understanding happen? Philosophical hermeneutics, as Gadamer himself put it, is concerned with 'understanding understanding'. As a philosophical discipline, hermeneutics examines and describes what happens when understanding of any kind takes place.

### What is understanding?

Hermeneutic thinkers argue that understanding is the interpretive act of integrating particular things such as words, signs, and events into a meaningful whole. We understand an object, word, or fact when it makes sense within our own life context and thus speaks to us meaningfully. When we understand objects, texts, or situations in this way, they become part of our inner mental world so that we can express them again in our own terms. We have not understood a poem, for example, when we can merely repeat the words by heart; rather we demonstrate understanding when we intone the words meaningfully and are able to express the poem's ideas in our own words.

Hermeneutic thinkers believe that in most cases understanding as this kind of integration happens unconsciously, because we already move in a familiar cultural environment within which

we perceive words and objects in a pre-established context of meaning. Our modern culture tends to think that real knowledge consists in quantification, that is, in the scientific numerical description of things in the world. On this account, objective truth requires an impersonal, theoretical stance toward things. Hermeneutic philosophers contend, on the contrary, that our primary mode of perception is not theoretical but practical, and depends on our current desires or interests.

Imagine for a moment that you want to attend a concert or play. After parking the car and walking six city blocks on a cold, rainy evening, and while lining up at the entrance for another half hour, you glimpse an inviting auditorium seat. The seat appears to you not as a meaningless object of neutral observation but as a place of comfort where you can rest and warm your weary bones while enjoying the anticipated performance. You do not first perceive this seat from a purely objective stance in terms of its compositional material or its measurements. Such a theoretical stance is not our primary mode of perception, but a secondary, unnatural way of looking at things we adopt when we abstract something from the context of our experience to study it separately. Should, for example, the seat collapse under us as we sat down, only then would we adopt a scientific attitude and examine the seat to determine its structure and the reasons for its malfunction.

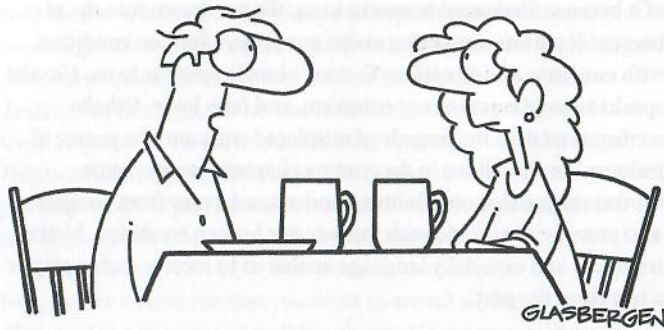
If hermeneutic philosophers are right in believing that this practical understanding is our primary mode of perception, then the way we perceive the world as meaningful is closer to our experience of art than to a science experiment. When we enjoy a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, or study the text of this play, we intuitively grasp that we encounter not contemporary reality but a play that arises from the social and political milieu of old England. If we were professional critics, we could also analyse the archaic language of the play, long-lost allusions, and wordplays that would deepen our grasp of the play's inner dynamic. Yet beyond any of these details, we enjoy the play and may be led into a deeper study

of it because Shakespeare speaks to us. We are drawn into the play because it tells us something about our present human condition, with emotions and situations that are already familiar to us. *Hamlet* speaks to us of betrayal, opportunism, and false loves. *Othello* confronts us with the tragedy of misplaced trust and the power of jealousy. As we will see in the coming chapters, hermeneutic thinkers argue that our ability to understand a play from roughly 400 years ago has to do with the way our human condition, history, tradition, and especially language enable us to receive such a play or a text from the past.

### Interpreting animals

While we have used the word 'activity' to describe understanding as the interpretive act of integrating things into a meaningful whole, hermeneutic philosophers argue that interpretation is not only something we do but also something we *are*. Interpretation is not an occasional luxury but our fundamental way of being in the world. We are 'interpreting animals', and human knowing always entails interpretation, whether we are dealing with a Shakespearean play or a hypothesis in physics. Now, someone might object that knowledge consists in ascertaining facts, while interpretation is not about knowing real facts but about determining meaning. As we shall see in the chapter on science, this neat distinction between knowledge of facts and understanding of meaning is highly problematic. Imagine an alien scientist, who finds a broken toaster and tries to fix it. Even if the alien analyses all the nuts and bolts of the toaster, knowledge of these details alone will not help him understand their function within the combined whole of a bread toasting machine designed to enhance a human breakfast. He might possibly fix the toaster, but not understand its purpose. For all he knows, this might be a machine for ejecting pre-warmed, small plates before dinner.

Philosophical hermeneutics, in other words, stands for a certain conviction about the nature and communication of truth, namely that all understanding is a matter of interpretation and that



**“Honey, when you say we can’t communicate...  
what exactly do you mean?”**

## 2. Communication and interpretation.

interpretation is essentially the personal integration of objects or words into a meaningful whole. True knowledge that involves understanding is not ultimately rule governed because our whole life experience conditions our insights in a way that is irreducible to method. I can memorize a map or a set of rules about map reading and still get lost because I cannot integrate the information with the terrain itself or personally grasp the conventions of map reading. Meaningful knowledge and communication require more than mere information exchange and cannot be mastered by mere technique. They require the personal integration of details into a meaningful whole—they require interpretation. As the cartoon indicates (see Figure 2), sometimes even the clearest statements hold deep existential meanings that cannot be explained by rules of logic or language.

## The three central claims of hermeneutics

Hermeneutics as a philosophical field of study is a wide disciplinary tent that accommodates a great variety of philosophers, theologians, and literary and legal theorists from the past and the present who have written about interpretation. We

can grasp their shared interests when we define *hermeneutic thinkers* as those who are concerned more specifically with the universal conditions for human understanding in three areas: the nature of consciousness, the nature of truth, and the importance of language. Hermeneutic philosophers believe that in each of these vital areas of our experience, key developments in modern thought and culture have brought about a distorted view of who we are and how we arrive at knowledge.

## Consciousness: the self is no island

Hermeneutic thinkers claim that our modern consciousness has been shaped in such a way that we imagine ourselves as islands of awareness floating in the grand ocean of life, disconnected from other selves. We tend to think of the mind as something interior, separated from the outside material world. From this inner island, or bubble, we reach out to make contact with others and with the world around us. In philosophical terms, we are individual subjects confronted by external objects, such as nature or other people. We don’t often reflect on the problems of such a view because it rather agrees with our sense of self-sufficiency and individual freedom. We like to think that no one tells us what to do, and that we make up our own minds after considering all the evidence in a completely unbiased way. On this view, ideas, concepts, and even historical events appear as if passing on a conveyor belt before our mind’s eye, from which we take what we consciously decide to make our own.

The Canadian philosopher and hermeneutic thinker Charles Taylor helpfully labelled this specious self-contained consciousness a ‘disengaged self’, because outside influences are admitted only by conscious choice. Hermeneutic thinkers, by contrast, believe in an ‘engaged self’ that is fundamentally connected to the world and to other people. They argue that consciousness itself is shaped by the way in which we inhabit the world. The universal human experiences of birth, death, hunger, and the need for

shelter already determine how we see the world and undergird the formation of every particular culture. Moreover, culture, language, and upbringing shape our attitudes long before we make conscious decisions. The community or tradition to which we belong gives us the lenses through which we see the world.

### Truth is an event

Our view of consciousness naturally informs our understanding of truth and how we obtain it. Based on the assumption of separation between mind and world, the disengaged self naturally favours disengaged reason. Disengaged reason is the kind of abstract, theoretical view of truth we know from a scientific laboratory: a detached observer arrives at an insight by setting up a methodical experiment, and will arrive at the same result every time the same methodical procedure is repeated. Here knowledge is the result of method and empirically verifiable repetition. Objective knowledge is defined as the result of this disinterested observation.

Hermeneutic thinkers, however, believe that we have falsely elevated this scientific ideal of knowledge, allowing it to become the measure of all human knowledge. They contest the idea that knowledge is obtained through disinterested observation. Rather, hermeneutic thinkers say that we only conduct experiments and want to know about the world because we are already deeply involved in it at the level of everyday, practical activity. Without this prior experiential relation to things, scientific results would be meaningless. As the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891–1976) pointed out, 'If we did not know what water is by drinking it and boiling it in our kettles, the scientific statement that water is  $H_2O$  would be merely a meaningless noise.'

For hermeneutics, knowledge is more than naming and describing objects; it involves understanding meaningful structures we already participate in. This is not only true in the case of science,

but also in the humanities and social sciences. Let's take, for example, the study of history. Disengaged-self people argue that we dispassionately observe history from the outside and present merely the facts to arrive at objective truth about past events. By contrast, hermeneutic thinkers argue that the reason we can understand history in the first place is because we are historical beings through and through. We are part of history and shaped by it. Disengaged-self people argue that we should suppress our personal beliefs or prejudices in order to escape the ideological blinders of tradition. Those who champion a hermeneutic view of truth, however, object that past texts or events hold meaning for us in the first place because we stand within a tradition that has provided us with the very concepts through which we are connected to the past in a meaningful way.

When, for example, we read Plato's dialogues on law and government, we do so as people whose lives have been profoundly shaped by other readers of these texts. We enter into a long-standing conversation on just laws and governance, a conversation in which Plato's reflections have shaped constitutions all over the world, including that of the United States. This is simply to say that we see the world through the eyes our cultural traditions provide for us. Without these conceptual lenses that allow us meaningful access to reality, we would be blind. Hermeneutic thinkers hold that we arrive at truth because we already participate in something greater that conveys truth to us, such as the language and cultural tradition we inhabit. It is therefore misleading to pretend such influence does not exist or to repress it for the sake of supposed objectivity. Such repression blinds us to our guiding influences and thus prevents us from understanding why we believe what we believe. Thus, ironically, obsession with objectivity can entrap us in subjectivism. Instead, hermeneutic thinkers insist that we need to redefine objective truth as something we take part in rather than something we merely observe from a distance. We don't make truth happen; rather truth is something that happens to us. Truth is an event.

## The importance of language

For disengaged-self people and their theoretical, detached way of seeing the world, language is like a toolbox of labels we attach to things in order to handle them. Words and the ideas expressed through them are instruments that help us communicate our needs, obtain things, persuade others to give us what we want, and allow us to describe and control our world. This instrumental conception of language flows naturally from the division between our perception of the world (as so many objects external to us) and the images or linguistic expressions we use to designate these objects. Perception and language are kept apart. The common expression to speak nothing but the 'naked truth' fittingly illustrates this separation of truth from the uncertainties of language. This demand for 'naked truth' stems from Thomas Sprat (1635–1713), an English clergyman and member of the royal scientific society, who was so enamoured with the clarity of scientific language that he wanted to strip truth of any images or metaphors to grant us access to how things really are. That Sprat himself had to use the image of nakedness to make his point is a pretty good indication that language and its images are more central to perception than he was willing to admit.

A common objection to the universal claim of hermeneutics that all understanding is a matter of interpretation is that our immediate sense experience of the world precedes any interpretation. For example, we have a toothache, or we sense heat, before we can put these sensations into words and interpret them. Hermeneutic thinkers don't deny this immediate experience; they do deny, however, that we can have a *meaningful* experience without understanding pain or temperature first within a cultural vocabulary by which we make sense of things. Just think of the way in which languages express the same sense experience differently: In English, I *am* cold. In French, I *have* cold (*j'ai froid*), and in

German, it *is* cold to me (*mir ist kalt*). While relating the same sense experience of coldness, each linguistic variation expresses a different relation of the self to the world.

The language we use already interprets for us a certain way in which we relate to sense experience and how we express it to others. For this reason, hermeneutic thinkers argue that language guides our perception intrinsically. For them, language includes any images, signs, or symbols by which we understand and communicate our experience of the world. They believe that our perception of the world and our thought depends on an intricate linguistic web of words and concepts that develop historically over time. Words and terms we inherit through our upbringing provide guiding concepts for our recognition of meaningful human experience.

This symbolic universe into which we are inducted from childhood on provides what hermeneutic philosophers call our *pre-understanding* of the things we interpret. Moreover, according to hermeneutics, language gives us humans the unique ability to abstract images from immediate sense experience to develop sophisticated concepts and ideas, such as justice, freedom, equality, legal systems, and the like. Because of this linguistic ability, we are able to preserve and pass on our cultural achievements to subsequent generations. In early oral cultures, this transmission took place through stories. Especially through the later inventions of writing, texts, and libraries, we are able to store and communicate our cultural achievements. Language lies at the root of this astounding ability to transmit culture. Hermeneutic thinkers claim that naked truth does not exist. Rather, our experience of the world and our reflections about the world always occur through images, concepts, and words. In short, the world is given to us already interpreted through language. Language, as Martin Heidegger famously put it, is 'the house of being'.



## Is 'hermeneutics' another word for relativism?

Hermeneutics makes the universal claim that we are interpreting animals. Interpretation is not an optional activity, something we do every now and then when the naked facts aren't clear. The only way we can ever experience the world as meaningful is through interpretation. To perceive is to interpret. Many misunderstand this universal claim that all knowledge is interpretive to signal the denial of objective truth and to invite the spectre of relativism. Relativism is the concept that whatever we hold to be true has no absolute, universal validity but is relative to our personal historical and cultural circumstances. The fear of relativism crops up whenever people talk about interpretation, especially in debates about ethics. Moral relativism means that all moral claims are simply cultural conventions that can be changed at any time. According to this view, your mother's rule to keep your elbows off the table at dinner would carry the same moral weight as the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When people learn that I teach hermeneutics and believe in a hermeneutic view of truth, a common response is, 'So you're a relativist, right?' The argument underlying this response is usually something like this: hermeneutics basically means interpretation, and interpretation is what we do until we really figure something out and arrive at objective, final, indisputable knowledge. The claim is that we interpret subjectively and produce merely personal opinion, but we know objectively and arrive at true, impartial knowledge. Surely, we have all heard the comment, 'Ah but that's not how it really is. That's just your interpretation of the matter.' This sentiment conveys an image of truth as something that rests on fixed rules and formulas, not unlike mathematics. After all, two plus two is four, no matter who looks at the equation, and we can fly airplanes because our technology relies on empirically proven, unchanging physical laws that are the same for everyone. Given this model of truth, interpretation is opposed

to *real* knowledge. So when someone claims that knowledge is *always* a matter of interpretation, this person must be a relativist who believes that objective truth is impossible and that all we have are competing, mutually exclusive truth claims. Ultimately, binding truth would then be decided by convention or by force.

Hermeneutics rejects this simple opposition of impartial objective truth on the one hand, and subjective opinion on the other. Fortunately, even many scientists today question this opposition, which stems itself from the now widely discredited view that scientific discoveries rest purely on experimental method and strictly rule-governed, impersonal observation by which we carefully pile knowledge upon knowledge until a discovery is obtained. For a long time, this scientific method was accepted as the gold standard of truth for which every knowledge discipline should strive. Today, however, many academics and scientists have come to believe that this gold standard has proven to be a golden calf, the false idol of 'scientific objectivism', which we worshipped for a while, but which is now exposed and deposed for its distortion of how knowledge works.

While the scientific method continues to remain an important tool, scientists have realized that the process of discovery is much more intuitive and uncontrolled than formerly imagined. Now, objectivism and relativism appear as two sides of the same coin. Both extremes are based on the same faulty concept of objectivity. So with this toppling of the simple opposition between subjective and objective truth, a position beyond objectivism and relativism became possible. At least among many scholars there is now an emerging consensus to regard the attainment of objective truth less like watching a spectator sport and more like playing a game. In a board game or a tennis match, there are rules and conventions one must observe to play, but at the same time, each performance is unique and requires passionate involvement to succeed. It is only by being deeply involved that any

understanding of the play can take place. For hermeneutic thinkers, this is how all knowledge works. Objective understanding of the world, others, and ourselves requires personal engagement and passionate curiosity.

Acknowledging personal engagement in obtaining knowledge does not invite relativism. After all, to claim that all knowledge is relative to a personal standpoint, is not at all the same as claiming that only individual perspectives exist and are all of equal value. It is only to claim that we are not gods who look down on our world, but finite creatures deeply affected by the course of history. The hermeneutic claim that our knowledge is always relative to a certain context and personal viewpoint would only be relativism if we actually were isolated selves, unformed by history or language. In truth, however, our standpoint always includes a universally valid context of meaning, or what philosophers call a 'horizon'. Of course, what exactly this shared horizon consists of is a much-debated question. For most hermeneutic thinkers, this horizon is the tradition and language we inhabit, and through which we share a meaningful world. While they admit that our ways of seeing the world are culturally dependent, they also acknowledge universally shared human conditions that give rise to transcultural experiences, such as evil, sacrifice or love, that allow for the translation of our particular cultural symbols. Most hermeneutic thinkers are firm believers in universal reason that allows for translation between all languages and cultures. To understand is to interpret: this universal claim of hermeneutics is not relativism but the admission that we are not gods.

## Chapter 2

### Hermeneutics: a brief history

The history of hermeneutics is a conversation about knowledge. As soon as we pronounce the word 'interpretation', we are entering into a long-standing conversation about what constitutes valid knowledge. Simply by asking the question 'what is hermeneutics?' we are joining a discussion about the nature of human knowledge, a conversation that connects ancient and modern conceptions of knowledge.

#### Knowledge in the ancient world

In the ancient world, knowledge was much more unified than it is today. Not only mathematics and logic, but also poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy were counted as important sources of objective truth. In fact, for the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, the transmission of knowledge depended largely on the preservation and interpretation of authoritative texts. Philosophical, religious, and literary texts, such as those written by Homer or Virgil, had quasi-sacred status because they were regarded as having captured essential insights into human nature. These texts were carefully preserved and commented on from one generation to the next, a practice that eventually led to the invention of libraries and helped establish basic interpretive principles that are still valid today. Education in the ancient world consisted of the students' immersion in such texts and their