

HERMENEUTICS: AN INTRODUCTION

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

FALL 2026

SATURDAYS, 11:00 AM–12:00 PM ET

RICHARD SHARPE, MA



DESCRIPTION

A notoriously tricky term to define, *hermeneutics* can be defined provisionally as an investigation of the concrete processes and rules involved in the interpretation and understanding of communication, especially of texts. Throughout the history of the Western intellectual tradition, several disciplines have developed distinctive modes of hermeneutics: most notably, theological exegesis, literary criticism, and jurisprudence. In the premodern period, these intellectual disciplines, given their demarcated and limited scopes, tended to develop methods and rules specific to their respective spheres of interpretation. In the modern period, however, several philosophers took up the major concerns of hermeneutics in an effort to provide a unified theory of understanding itself—i.e., a theory of what happens in any and every event of understanding. In turn, these thinkers expanded the scope of hermeneutics significantly. First, many of them claim that interpretation is involved in *all acts and processes* of understanding, not merely the assessment of (particular types of) texts; second, many of them claim that interpretation is not confined to the *rules and methods* of any particular intellectual discipline(s).



This course explores not the “regional” specialist hermeneutics of the various intellectual disciplines, but instead the modern conception of a general philosophical hermeneutics, especially as elaborated by two major twentieth-century hermeneutic philosophers: Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). We shall study their work with particular reference to two guiding concerns: first, the question of **universality** (i.e., can and ought a philosophical hermeneutics be universal in scope, encompassing interpretation in all realms of understanding?) and, second, the question of **method** (i.e., can and ought philosophical hermeneutics, especially if taken to be universal in scope, employ one or more methods of interpretation, or is it to be conducted without method?).

To understand the nature and questions of hermeneutics, we shall explore the significance of **historicity, tradition, language, method, time, and narrative** (and more) in the processes of interpretation. In addition to these general topics, we shall explore concepts particularly championed by each thinker (for instance, the role of *φρόνησις* for Gadamer, and the role of metaphor for Ricoeur). Throughout, we shall return to the fundamental question of hermeneutics: “**What happens in the event of understanding?**”

METHOD

The seminar is eight weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around readings from Gadamer, Ricoeur, or another author. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may

engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. Participants are also strongly encouraged to share their developing thoughts and questions in the Teams channel prior to the class session.

No prior background in philosophy is required, and all participants are welcome. That said, some familiarity with the basic concepts and history of philosophy—especially of phenomenology and the broader 20th century European philosophical landscape—is particularly advantageous for engaging fully with the material.

Gadamer and Ricoeur produced a voluminous literary output, and their major works can be dense, especially for beginners. In turn, our primary texts consist of accessible essays representative of their core concepts. Nonetheless, **required readings typically total 40–60 pages per week**, though some weeks feature longer and/or more challenging assignments. Accordingly, **allow at least 90 minutes per day for reading and reflection**. Supplementary, non-required literature is also available for those who wish to pursue a topic further.

READING

All required and supplemental readings will be provided via Teams. If you prefer physical editions, the following contain most, though not all, of our primary readings:

- Gadamer, [*The Gadamer Reader*](#) (Palmer, ed.), Northwestern UP.
- Ricoeur, [*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*](#) (Thompson, ed./trans.), Cambridge UP.

Readings are subject to change. Any and all changes will be announced in a timely manner.

LECTURE

At the beginning of each week, a 20–40+ minute audio lecture will be posted to Teams. Lectures will clarify difficult concepts and arguments from the assigned reading, while also introducing related topics and questions to guide discussion. Visual aids may accompany the lectures, but they should generally be intelligible without them. Although the audio format allows flexibility—for example, while commuting or exercising—the material is often conceptually demanding and requires attentive listening, with pauses, note-taking, or review as needed.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session, where all thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

Official seminar sessions run on **Saturdays, 11:00 AM–12:00 PM ET**, though discussions frequently extend beyond the hour for those interested and able to stay.

AUDITS OR COMPLETES

All Lyceum Institute seminar participants will be able to either *audit* the seminar or *complete* the seminar. To complete the seminar, the participant must submit an essay of 2000+ words pertaining to the subject. This essay may be evaluated for publication in *Reality* and will be included in each Lyceum Institute member's profile, along with the mark of auditing or completing.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Week I (Sep 6–12)	<u>Introductory Concepts</u> Lecture: “Hermeneutics”: Definitions, A Brief History, and Some Major Themes Required Reading: - Gadamer, “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics” (<i>The Gadamer Reader</i> [TGR], pp. 41–71) - Gadamer, “From Word to Concept” (TGR, pp. 108–120) Background Reading: - Grondin, “Hans-Georg Gadamer” (<i>Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics</i> [BCH], pp. 397–403) - Palmer, “<i>Hermeneuein</i> and <i>Hermeneia</i>” (<i>Hermeneutics</i>, pp. 12–32)
Week II (Sep 13–19)	<u>Gadamer (I): History and Understanding</u> Lecture: <i>Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein</i>, or: How I Learned to Love Prejudice, Authority, and Tradition Required Reading: - Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” (TGR, pp. 72–88) - Gadamer, Selections from <i>Truth and Method</i> (pp. 274–306; 363–371) Background Reading: - Gander, “Gadamer: The Universality of Hermeneutics” (<i>Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics</i>, pp. 137–147) - Grondin, <i>Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics</i> (IPH), pp. 106–117
Week III (Sep 20–26)	<u>Gadamer (II): Hermeneutics and Language</u> Lecture: “Being That Can Be Understood is Language”: <i>Sprachlichkeit</i>, Dialogue, and the <i>Verbum Interius</i> Required Reading: - Gadamer, “Man and Language” (<i>Philosophical Hermeneutics</i>, pp. 59–68) - Gadamer, “Language and Understanding” (TGR, pp. 89–107) - Gadamer, “The Incapacity for Conversation” (<i>Continental Philosophy Review</i> 39 [2006], pp. 351–359) Background Reading: - Risser, “Philosophical Hermeneutics, Language, and the Communicative Event” (<i>The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer</i>, 2nd Ed. [CCG], pp. 93–116) - Grondin, IPH, pp. 117–123
Week IV (Sep 27–Oct 3)	<u>Gadamer (III): Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy</u> Lecture: Φρόνησις and Friendship: An Aristotelian Anamnesis Required Reading: - Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy” (TGR, pp. 227–245) - Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task” (TGR, pp. 246–265) Recommended Reading: - Gadamer, “What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason” (<i>Reason in the Age of Science</i>, pp. 69–87) - Gadamer, “Friendship and Solidarity” (<i>Research in Phenomenology</i> 39 [2009], pp. 3–12) Background Reading: - Walhof, “<i>Phronesis</i> and Solidarity: Democratic Politics” (CCG, pp. 117–138)

October 10	BREAK
Week V (Oct 11–17)	<u>Ricoeur (I): The Tasks of Distanciation and Appropriation</u> Lecture: Not So Fast: Ricoeur’s “Long Way to Hermeneutics” Required Reading: - Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics” (<i>Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences [HHS]</i>, pp. 3–22) - Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation” (<i>HHS</i>, pp. 93–106) - Ricoeur, “Appropriation” (<i>HHS</i>, pp. 144–156) Background Reading: - Piercey, “Paul Ricoeur” (<i>BCH</i>, pp. 412–416)
Week VI (Oct 18–24)	<u>Ricoeur (II): Text, Meaning, and Metaphor</u> Lecture: « Expliquer plus, c’est comprendre mieux » Required Reading: - Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding” (<i>HHS</i>, pp. 107–126) - Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics” (<i>HHS</i>, pp. 127–143) Recommended Reading: - Ricoeur, “Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language” (<i>A Ricoeur Reader [RR]</i>, pp. 65–85) Background Reading: - Simms, “Metaphor” (<i>Paul Ricoeur [PR]</i>, pp. 61–77)
Week VII (Oct 25–31)	<u>Ricoeur (III): Narrative, Time, and History</u> Lecture: Narrative: It’s About Time! (And History) Required Reading: - Ricoeur, “The Human Experience of Time and Narrative” (<i>RR</i>, pp. 99–116) - Ricoeur, “The Reality of the Historical Past” (1984 Aquinas Lecture) Recommended Reading: - Ricoeur, “Narrated Time” (<i>RR</i>, pp. 338–354) Background Reading: - Simms, “Narrative” (<i>PR</i>, pp. 79–99)
Week VIII (Nov 1–7)	<u>Gadamerian Tradition and Ricoeurian Critique</u> Lecture: Gadamer and Ricoeur: Combatants or Confrères? Required Reading: - Ricoeur, “The Conflict of Interpretations: Debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer” (<i>RR</i>, pp. 216–241) - Aylesworth, “Dialogue, Text, Narrative: Confronting Gadamer and Ricoeur” (<i>Continental Philosophy IV: Gadamer and Hermeneutics [CP:IV]</i>, pp. 63–81) - Lawlor, “The Dialectical Unity of Hermeneutics: On Ricoeur and Gadamer” (<i>CP:IV</i>, pp. 82–90) NB: Depending on participant interest, this final week may instead be used to (i) explore topics of particular interest that were not covered (e.g., <i>politics, art, science, or religion</i>), or (ii) delve more deeply into topics covered earlier in the seminar.