Interview with Jens Zimmermann Author of 'Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction'

Interview by Michael Wu and Chloe Lee-Sarenac

Dr. Jens Zimmermann is a German-Canadian philosopher and J.I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College. As the author of Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction, he held a lecture titled "Gadamer, Ricoeur and the Future of Philosophical Hermeneutics" at SFU. Hosted by the Department of World Languages and Literatures, the lecture focused on how we can use the art of hermeneutics to interpret literature and our identities of being human.

Michael Wu: How do hermeneutics help with understanding the interpretation and philosophies of literature? How do we see texts?

Jens Zimmermann: You'd have to ask what is a text and what does it do when you read it—I mean, what happens and what does it mean to understand what you're reading? Those are the kinds of hermeneutical questions that you have. The answer to these questions depends on what a text is. If it's a text from a contemporary author, it's different from when you read a text from an ancient author. Let's say you read Plato; ideally, in order to read it, you would have to read it in Greek. Why? Because the things that he talks about, his life world, is channelled through Greek language, through Greek expressions. And so when you have a translation, you already

have somebody that chooses among maybe five different possibilities, let's say, to translate the word logos. Somebody already makes the choice for you what Plato might have meant by that. One thing you can do, especially with ancient texts, is know the language they're written in. You'd have to learn Greek, Latin, or let's say if it's an ancient Chinese text, I would have to learn Chinese, otherwise I'm relying on somebody's translation, which can be pretty good, but it's not the same thing. You have to recognize difference of culture and time when you read a text and we often forget that when we read text in translation.

One helpful way to look at literature and texts is to treat them as if we entered a conversation. When I'm at home and I look at my books, they're like friends I haven't met yet that may have something to say on something I'm interested in. So when I want to read something on love or justice or beauty, whatever, I'm going to see what this person has to say on it. Of course, a written text is different from conversing directly with a person. In a direct dialogue, we can have a back and forth of question and answer to clarify meaning. We cannot ask a book "what did you mean by that?" Still, the beauty of written texts is that somebody's thoughts are recorded for us regardless of time and place. It's amazing that over any distance of time people can put their mind into writing, and I can, by reading it, understand what they've been saying. I can have a conversation with somebody I've never met and it can shape my thinking.

What, then, does it mean to understand what a text says to me? To understand means you realise what an author is saying and it means something to you and you make it your own—when you go like "aha!", this makes sense to me, this helps me understand what I am experiencing in my life. There are a number of ways which texts can do that. One would be conceptual, like philosophy texts, and there's a description of something, some concept you're wondering about, some idea. And all of a sudden, you kind of get it. It's like you fuse with the world Plato puts out there around this idea. You realise, yeah, I get it—and you internalise it. That's what I think understanding is.

There's another way you often see in literature. Read a novel or a poem or anything, and it puts out a whole world there for you that you can either enter into or not. One of the powers of literature is to project an imagined world of being. Ricoeur calls it "the world in front of the text", and that's really what texts do. One of the questions that always comes up is "what does it mean to understand a text?" People say it means to understand the mind of the author: the author's intentions. But you can't climb into somebody's mind. All you have is the text. The email you sent that you wish you never sent? What is written there is what you're saying. Not what you might have intended and did not convey in words. It's out there; you can't call it back. You can't say "oh, that's not what I really meant", because, why didn't you say it then? That's what a text is: it's a miracle, but it's also exactly what you have. You don't have the author's mind behind the text. You have the text. From that, you construe what you think the meaning is.

Chloe Lee-Sarenac: In the context of A.I. and language models, removing the authorial intent runs into the danger of removing the human intelligence behind the replication of our cultural tradition and writings over the years. In your book *A Very Short Introduction*, you

talk about language as fundamental to being a human person. What is the difference between us and A.I. then, if the text is all that will remain?

JZ: That's actually a really good question. I think it makes a huge difference. You have this problem of Shakespeare, for instance. There's a lot of scholarship on the question as whether Shakespeare ever wrote any of the plays that we attribute to him. Does it matter? What matters is that some human being wrote it. I think that's the difference. So I think when you use the word language, everything depends on what you mean by this term. Computer scientists who construct A.I. programs often mean by language merely symbols attached arbitrarily to objects. Language for them is just a kind of code, and they believe that machines can handle code the same or even better than human beings. Human language, however, is so much more than that. The proper term for it is linguisticality, which means our ability to be at home with expressing ourselves through language. So it's not just symbols that you shuffle around, it's language. It's like the air that carries us and that which we breathe and which we exhale and which always has reference to human experience and therefore to the human body, Embodied linguistic experience, however, means absolutely nothing to an algorithm because the algorithm has no body. So those are the differences. So the machine can only take and mindlessly shuffle around what humans have produced. That is why the term artificial intelligence is totally misleading. Machines do not have intelligence because they are not embodied spirits and therefore do not speak or have language in the proper sense. I was so relieved by this computer programmer whom we had a conference with who said "never forget that algorithms are code, when you talk about artificial intelligence, it's a written code". That's all it is. It's just nothing really. It's like zeroes and ones, whatever, right?

Translation programs can't work unless they're constantly fed by data from human translations worldwide. Without that, they don't work. And so one summer, I used the DeepL translator to translate a French text from the nineteenth century. The program completely bombed because it was not fueled by conversations in older French. You go to a modern text—much easier because there's the jargon and the stuff it's constantly fed and kept up to date, but if you go to that level, it just didn't know the use of certain words and language constellations because it's not fed by the living human. So the machine and the data require constant information from human intelligence to work. In any case, I guess what I want to say is what you're suggesting is impossible; there isn't real language there.

CLS: But nonetheless we interpret it in some sense. When we have a "conversation" with ChatGPT, it gives us a text, no?

JZ: Of course, because we're incurably meaning making creatures. I mean you want to interpret anything that doesn't make immediate sense—even if there's three chicken scratches on the wall that look like it's writing, I'm going to try to decipher it, for sure. You have to realise that the machine only mashes together words according to statistical analysis of probable constellations scanned from millions of pages of writing. There is no understanding at all. It is us, the human reader, who supplies the understanding when we try to read the text mindlessly produced by a machine.

CLS: So the human activity of the interpreter is

the same regardless?

JZ: Yeah, you pour your humanity into this completely empty shuffling of symbols. That's the Chinese room problem. It's not that the machine has become sentient. It's a simulation that appears to be near perfect, but that's not language.

MW: You know the idea of the hermeneutic circle and to get closer you have to revisit a text over and over again and reinterpret it? We were wondering how that can help us when we're reading the news these days, especially when it's so headline and summary driven because a lot of people won't read the article, so I was wondering how we could use hermeneutics and how to combat that. The idea of news and how it can be unreliable or even fake these days.

JZ: Yeah, that's another really good question. One of the issues with the newsfeeds and the way they're generated is that you no longer have context. So for me, for example, when I want to know something about the Middle East or something like that, I get news which I don't understand unless I put it in some kind of context. So what I used to do is to read books by these great journalists that lived half their lives in those countries, or they travelled there very often, and so they reported on that and they wrote on that and they gave you a lived experience context from within which you can then interpret that Israel and Hamas did various things. Without some such contextualization, you're completely at the mercy of the kind of spin that these news have. That's pretty much all we have now. The problem is that without historical context, you can just spin things and people don't even investigate anymore, because it comes so hard and fast, and I think that's one of the issues. For hermeneutic understanding of truth, you would certainly need to have more context to try to understand. You would also want other views. That's part of the dialogical nature of truth. I think what really works for me in order to change my mind or to be informed is I'd have to talk to somebody who actually has some living experience with these things. If you have people who you can talk to, it makes a big difference. I think you're right though, it's the speed of news, our lack of time, and the impatience we have with these things that allows these kinds of spins to proliferate and to grow and they develop into these main narratives which you then can't challenge anymore.

MW: It's like what you said about how the translator has already interpreted the work and they're showing you their interpretation of it. Is that similar to news where the journalist or writer has already interpreted it and are showing you their spin on it?

JZ: Yeah, that's right. But we have to remember that everything we say or do is an interpretation of our shared life world. Truth is always given to us as an interpretation, as a way of seeing things. But readers or listeners have to make an interpretation of their own through critical appropriation by exercising their judgement. Good judgement, in turn, however, requires lots of context. That's why a liberal arts education, and reading of literature—the things you do here at SFU—are so important. You need, to cite a famous Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye, an educated imagination, to discern what is true and what is false.

This interview has been edited for clarity.