Hermeneutics: the term 'hermeneutics' (from the Greek word ἡρμηνεύς, 'interpreter') is thought to be derived from the name of the Greek god Hermes who functioned in classical mythology to relay to humans messages sent by the gods. (Hermes was often depicted as playing tricks on those he was supposed to give messages to, often altering the messages and influencing the interpretation thereof.) From at least the Middle Ages, the term 'Hermeneutics' was closely tied to the attempt to formulate principles designed to ensure the correct interpretation of the Bible and related texts in the Christian tradition.

However, more recently, it has come to be used in a broader sense to denote the study of the theories and methods involved in the interpretation of texts more generally. Modern hermeneutics, which takes its lead from its principal exponent in the nineteenth century, Friedrich von Schleiermacher, has come to denote a particular method of interpretation the goal of which is to use the language of the text in question (either oral or written) to 'get inside,' as it were, the author's mind and thereby identify his intention, that is, the specific meaning which s/he has imparted to the words in question. Recently, the concept of 'text' has been extended beyond merely oral or written texts to include any number of objects (e.g. film, art, society, etc.) that are accordingly treated as texts and, thus, subjected to interpretation. Hermeneutics has also increasingly come to be seen by many (e.g. Richard Harvey Brown, Richard Rorty) as something of an alternative (so-called interpretivism) to the positivism which informs the currently dominant approaches to epistemology in philosophy and the natural and social sciences.

The Hermeneutical Circle: this is the view that if we are to understand the meaning of the whole, we must grasp the meaning of its constituent parts and, by the same token, if we are to understand the meaning of the verbal parts of a linguistic whole, we must also have some prior sense of the meaning of the whole. This circular interpretive process applies to the relationship between individual words and the sentence of which it is part as well the relationship between particular sentences and the work as a whole.

Hermeneutical Approaches

Humanist Hermeneutics: hermeneuticists of this 'school' such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Emilio Betti and E. D. Hirsch see themselves as carrying on the tradition of Romantic Hermeneutics epitomised by Schleiermacher.

Romantic Hermeneutics: the founder of modern hermeneutics is Friedrich Schleiermacher, a product of the Romantic movement in Germany during the nineteenth century.

Phenomenological Hermeneutics (or Hermeneutical Phenomenology): this studies, from a phenomenological perspective, the interpretive structures by which sense is made of experience, that is, the literary and rhetorical strategies through which we seek to understand and engage with things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others. Key phenomenological hermeneuticists include Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the twentieth century.

Rhetorical Hermeneutics: an approach, advanced by theorists like Steven Mailloux, to reading texts as a form of rhetoric.