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## Interpretation and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method: A Dilemma (Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 10/1 (2016), 58–82.

The Norwegian philosopher Dagfinn Føllesdal and his German colleague Heide Göttner argued independently from one another that the interpretation of literary texts proceeds by the hypothetico-deductive method. In this paper I critically examine their view. My interest, however, is systematic rather than exegetical. After elucidating the claim and working through some case studies, I discuss several objections raised in the debate. My central point is that the view runs into a dilemma: there is no variant of the view which is both tenable and capable of showing that the interpretation of literature is a respectable scientific activity.

Among other things Føllesdal (1979) and Göttner (1973) argue that the justification of hypotheses in interpretations of works of literature proceeds by the hypothetico-deductive method. I refer to this as the HD-view. Systematically, it has much to offer. If interpretation is hypothetico-deductive, then it seems to inherit all the alleged merits of this method: exactness, intersubjectivity, reliability, and rationality, among other things. Interpreting literary works would turn out to be a proper scientific activity subject to the same general standards as, say, experimental physics. The interpretation of literary works is thereby demystified and rendered comprehensible. Also, the HD-view would speak in favor of the idea that all empirical science is equal, unified by a single method and the same general goals, among them, arguably, pursuing the truth and generating knowledge.

In the first section of my paper I elucidate the HD-view in more detail. The key element of the view is the hypothetico-deductive method. The idea of the HD-method is roughly this. One forms a hypothesis which often cannot be directly verified (e. g., all ravens are black), deduces from this hypothesis in conjunction with auxiliary assumptions (e. g., this is a raven) all kinds of empirical consequences (e. g., this raven is black), and checks these consequences: observation either confirms or disconfirms them. If the consequences are disconfirmed, the hypothesis (or the auxiliary assumptions) should be discarded. If, however, the consequences are confirmed, the hypothesis (and the auxiliary assumptions) is also confirmed (to a certain degree) – it fits in with our experience. Importantly, the HD-method concerns not the genesis but the justification of a hypothesis.

After pointing out some of the philosophical issues surrounding the HD-method, I distinguish several variants of the HD-view that will play a role when assessing the objections directed against it. Finally, I discuss issues that arise when transferring the HD-method to the interpretation of literature, such as the role of hypotheses, auxiliary assumptions, data and observation.

The second part of my paper concerns Føllesdal's and Göttner's case studies and their positive arguments for the HD-view. I go through their examples (interpretations of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Walther's *Nemt, frowe, disen kranz*) and point out some general worries, in particular with the deductive parts of their reconstructions.

The third and final section addresses several objections that have been raised against the HD-view. Some argue that the view is too strict: other methods of justification are used in interpretations. Others argue that the view is too broad: some (kinds of) interpretation hypotheses cannot be justified by the HD-method. A third objection has it that the view fails because some interpretations cannot, even in principle, be (dis)confirmed. Some take the view to be a false descriptive claim. Others take it as a misguided normative claim. Finally, the view is said to be insufficient because it does not supply criteria to decide between rival interpretations. None of these objections is found to be fatal. However, the HD-view must be modified to circumvent each objection. These modifications result in the following variant of the view: the justification of empirical hypotheses in argumentative interpretations of literary works can be reconstructed as proceeding, among other things, by the HD-method.

Although this claim seems tenable it is far from the original view. This would not be a problem, if it were to meet the main goal the HD-view was meant to achieve, viz. show that the interpretation of literary works is a kosher scientific activity. Unfortunately, the modified variant does not deliver the goods. Only a fragment of all interpretations of literary works conducted in literary studies is rendered scientific. This result does not do justice to scientific practice. And it does not offer a methodology for all interpretations.

The result is a dilemma: the modified version of the HD-view is correct but misses its goal whereas the original version does meet this goal but is incorrect. The choice is between admitting that the project failed and saying something false.

The second horn of the dilemma – meeting the goal but saying something false – is no option for a rational being. Thus, friends of the original idea should opt for the first horn: admit that the project has failed and make something of the modified variant.

One way to go is to become revisionary and claim that only a fraction of all interpretations conducted in literary studies is actually scientific. This entails a ban from science for a bulk of current interpretative practice. I am not aware of anyone in the literature who defends this position. It is certainly not the position of Føllesdal or Göttner. And it faces the problem of explaining why the interpretations characterized by it are the only scientific ones.

I conclude that it is still a desideratum of literary studies to come up with a convincing methodology of interpretation.

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2016-05-16  
JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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**How to cite this item:**

Abstract of: Christian Folde, Interpretation and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method: A Dilemma.

In: JLTONline (16.05.2016)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003306

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003306>