

Christian Folde

**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.

References

- Bo Albert, Hans, Hermeneutik und Realwissenschaft, in: H. A. (ed.), *Sozialtheorie und soziale Praxis. Eduard Baumgarten zum 70. Geburtstag, Meisenheim am Glan 1971*, 42–77.
- Betz, Gregor, Revamping Hypothetico-Deductivism, *Erkenntnis* 78 (2013), 991–1009. [CrossRef] [Web of Science]
- Böhm, Jan M., *Kritische Rationalität und Verstehen. Beiträge zu einer naturalistischen Hermeneutik*, Amsterdam 2006.
- Bühler, Axel (ed.), *Hermeneutik. Basistexte zur Einführung in die wissenschaftstheoretischen Grundlagen von Verstehen und Interpretation*, Heidelberg 2003.
- Byrne, Alex, Truth in Fiction. The Story Continued, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1993), 24–35. [CrossRef]

- Cataldi, Luigi (ed.), *Naturalistische Hermeneutik. Ein neues Paradigma des Verstehens und Interpretierens*, Würzburg 2013.
- Charpa, Ulrich, *Philologischer Fortschritt*, *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 17 (1986), 229–255.
- Crupi, Vincenzo, *Confirmation*, in: Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/confirmation/> (20.12.2015).
- Currie, Gregory, *The Nature of Fiction*, Cambridge 1990.
- Danneberg, Lutz/Hans-Harald Müller, *Verwissenschaftlichung der Literaturwissenschaft. Ansprüche, Strategien, Resultate*, *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 10 (1979), 162–191.
- Danneberg, Lutz/Hans-Harald Müller, *Wissenschaftstheorie, Hermeneutik, Literaturwissenschaft. Anmerkungen zu einem unterbliebenen und Beiträge zu einem künftigen Dialog über die Methodologie des Verstehens*, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 58 (1984), 177–237.
- Folde, Christian, *Grounding Interpretation*, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55:3 (2015), 361–374. [Web of Science]
- Folde, Christian, *Three Dogmas of Narratology* (manuscript).
- Føllesdal, Dagfinn, *Hermeneutics and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method*, *Dialectica* 33 (1979), 319–336. [CrossRef]
- Føllesdal, Dagfinn, *Hermeneutics*, *International Journal of Psychoanalytics* 82 (2001), 375–379.
- Fricke, Harald, *Die Sprache der Literaturwissenschaft. Textanalytische und philosophische Untersuchungen*, München 1977.
- Fricke, Harald, *Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft. Beiträge zu Grundfragen einer verunsicherten Disziplin*, Paderborn 1991.
- Friend, Stacie, *Fiction as a Genre*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112 (2012), 179–209.
- Gemes, Ken, *Hypothetico-Deductivism. Incomplete but not Hopeless*, *Erkenntnis* 63 (2005), 139–147. [CrossRef]
- Göttert, Karl-Heinz, *Literaturwissenschaft und Analytische Philosophie*, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 17 (1975), 105–116.
- Göttner, Heide, *Logik der Interpretation. Analyse einer literaturwissenschaftlichen Methode unter kritischer Betrachtung der Hermeneutik*, München 1973.
- Göttner, Heide, *Probleme einer Logik der Interpretation*, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 17 (1975), 94–104.
- Göttner, Heide, *Zur Kontroverse um eine Logik der Interpretation*, in: Ulrich Nassen (ed.), *Studien zur Entwicklung einer materialen Hermeneutik*, München 1979, 101–119.
- Göttner, Heide, *Interpretation Theory and Practice – Recent Research in Germany*, *Poetics Today* 2 (1980), 171–183. [CrossRef]
- Göttner, Heide/Joachim Jacobs, *Der logische Bau von Literaturtheorien*, München 1978.
- Grewendorf, Günther, *Argumentation und Interpretation. Wissenschaftstheoretische Untersuchungen am Beispiel germanistischer Lyrikinterpretationen*, Kronberg i.Ts. 1975.
- Hirsch, Eric Donald, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven 1967.
- Kindt, Walther, *Über die Inadäquatheit des Argumentationsschemas von H. Göttner*, working paper 1975 (unpublished).
- Köppe, Tilmann/Tom Kindt, *Unreliable Narration With a Narrator and Without*, *Journal of Literary Theory* 5 (2011), 81–94.
- Köppe, Tilmann/Simone Winko, *Neuere Literaturtheorien. Eine Einführung* [2008], Stuttgart 2013.

- Künne, Wolfgang, *Abstrakte Gegenstände. Semantik und Ontologie* [1983], Frankfurt a.M. 2007.
- Kunne-Ibsch, Elrud, Rezension zu Heide Göttners *Logik der Interpretation*, *Deutsche Bücher* 5 (1975), 40–42.
- Lewis, David, *Truth in Fiction*, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 37–46.
- Mantzavinos, Chrysostomos, *Naturalistic Hermeneutics*, transl. from German by Darrell Arnold in collaboration with the author, Cambridge 2005.
- Martin, Michael/Lee McIntyre (ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Cambridge, MA 1994.
- Meggle, Georg/Manfred Beetz, *Interpretationstheorie und Interpretationspraxis*, Kronberg i. Ts. 1976.
- Pasternack, Gerhard, *Literaturwissenschaft und Methodologie*, *Orbis Litterarum* 30 (1975), 135–152. [CrossRef]
- Patzig, Günther, *Erklären und Verstehen. Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften*, in: G.P., *Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 4: Theoretische Philosophie*, Göttingen 1996, 117–145.
- Savigny, Eike von, *Argumentation in der Literaturwissenschaft. Wissenschaftstheoretische Untersuchungen zur Lyrikinterpretation*, München 1976.
- Shusterman, Richard, *The Logic of Interpretation*, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1978), 310–324.
- Sprenger, Jan, *Hypothetico-Deductive Confirmation*, *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011), 497–508. [CrossRef]
- Stegmüller, Wolfgang, *Walter von der Vogelweides Lied von der Traumliebe und Quasar 3 C 273. Betrachtungen zum sogenannten Zirkel des Verstehens und zur sogenannten Theoriebeladenheit der Beobachtungen*, in: W.S., *Rationale Rekonstruktion von Wissenschaft in ihrem Wandel. Mit einer autobiographischen Einleitung*, Stuttgart 1979, 27–86.
- Strube, Werner, *Analyse der Textinterpretation*, *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 5 (1988), 141–163.
- Strube, Werner, *Analytische Philosophie der Literaturwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zur literaturwissenschaftlichen Definition, Klassifikation, Interpretation und Textbewertung*, Paderborn 1993.
- Thurber, James, *The Macbeth Murder Mystery*, in: J.T., *The Thurber Carnival*, New York 1943, 71–75.
- Walton, Kendall L., *Categories of Art*, *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), 334–367.
- Walton, Kendall L., *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge 1990.
- Woodward, James, *Scientific Explanation*, in: Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/scientific-explanation/> (20.12.2015).

2016-05-16
JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

Copyright © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](#).

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>