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Der Schluss auf die beste Erklärung im Kontext der Literaturinterpretation
(Abstract)

This essay inquires into the possible application of the method of Inference to the Best Explanation (method of IBE) in the context of philological hermeneutics. Taking as its point of departure the diagnosis that the methodological foundation of literary studies is insufficiently elaborated, I presuppose an empirical conception of literary studies and attempt to find a remedy for this defect by turning attention to the method of IBE. The basic idea of IBE, as used in different scientific contexts, is to infer the accuracy of a hypothesis from its explanatory power. The user of the method of IBE runs through several successive processes of filtering or selection and at the end of them tags the »best« explanatory hypothesis. I will briefly present this operational sequence and then address the questions of what is possibly meant by an explanation and a »best« explanation. In the framework of the second sub-question answered in greater detail, I discuss a series of criteria established in the theory of science (simplicity, mechanism, unity, precision, range) which enable an explanation to be qualified as »better« than another.

The second part of the paper then concretely refers these fundamentals of the theory of science to philological hermeneutics. First, I suggest that we understand methodological considerations as independent from literary-theoretical background convictions: Many literary scholars advocate a pragmatic pluralism which states that certain literary theories, for instance structuralism or discourse analysis, already inherently contain the criteria of good quality for interpretations. Correspondingly, a hierarchy of interpretations over and above all theories would not make sense, as we can only refer to numerous »best« explanations. Although I do not hold the opinion that this pragmatic pluralism is convincing, I do not directly argue against it, but instead show that the applicability of the method of IBE does not have anything to do with this problem. As a matter of principle, namely, the method of IBE allows everything known to an interpreter about a text to become relevant in the framework of generating and selecting hypotheses. Literary-theoretical conviction will thus only pertain to the fine-tuning of the mechanism according to which hypotheses are judged as better or worse, but not to the structure of the method of interpretation itself. The idea that hypotheses are generated, selected, and then judged according to specific criteria in accordance with the method of IBE, is not affected by the content of the criteria.

The next section consists of a philological concretization of the explanatory virtues discussed more generally in the first part in terms of theory of science. Several examples make clear that these virtues do indeed have a place in philological hermeneutics. Problematic, however, are the criteria of simplicity and mechanism: the former because within the framework of philological interpretation the aesthetic appreciation of the interpreter can become relevant and this can possibly be conveyed by complex instead of simple interpretations, and the latter because it seems problematic to refer in the field of intentional connections to causal mechanisms in a more narrow sense. Moreover, because the criteria I discuss are not quantifiable, there will be several cases in which hypotheses neither satisfy them entirely nor at all, but rather only in part or in a certain respect. An additional advantage of the method of IBE is that it can deal with this vagueness to the extent that it recommends a comparative procedure

for the filtering of hypotheses. It is not a matter of deciding absolutely whether an explanation corresponds to an explanatory virtue, but rather of making comparative statements such as hypothesis A corresponds to such a virtue more or less than hypothesis B. In conclusion, I address a potential problem for a literary-studies application of the method of IBE which I call the problem of data identification. It consists of the fact that we first have to explain what we regard as the data material in the interpretation of literature that we then seek to explain by way of the method of IBE. I approach this problem in two ways: First, in my opinion, it can be ascribed to the epistemological insight into the theory-ladenness of (observational) statements and thus proves to not be specific to philological hermeneutics; second, it seems to me overestimated in its scope. By briefly recalling the meaningful distinction between descriptive and interpretive statements about a text, I try to elucidate that, even in the framework of text interpretation, there are by all means operations which are not particularly laden with or dependent upon theory. All in all, this leads me to a positive conclusion regarding the prospects of the method of IBE, especially in literary studies.

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