

***“How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations? Discuss with reference to the arts and one other area of knowledge.”***

Word count: 1427

The concept of a good and bad interpretation can be subjective depending on which AOK is being looked at. For example in the arts, a good and bad interpretation can instead be defined as to whether or not an interpretation of a work is appropriate or inappropriate. We can consider an interpretation to be inappropriate if the interpretation of the work goes against the author's personal values. In a different AOK such as the natural sciences however, a good interpretation of scientific data can be accurate or inaccurate. We can consider an interpretation of scientific data to be inaccurate if a conclusion is formed without any basis on previous or current scientific knowledge.

A way to distinguish whether or not an interpretation of a work of art is appropriate is to evaluate the interpretation of the work against the creator's personal beliefs regarding the subject of interpretation. An example of an inappropriate or “bad” interpretation of a work is *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* is interpreted by many to be an allegory for the events of world war 2. This is an inappropriate interpretation of his work as Tolkien himself has stated, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence.”(Goodreads). Tolkien also insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* is nothing more than a fantasy novel therefore we can say that it is an inappropriate interpretation to say that the work is an allegory. An example of an appropriate or “good” interpretation of a work is *Dune* by Frank Herbert. *Dune* is widely interpreted to be an allegory to highlight how people tend to blindly trust charismatic religious leaders in society. This interpretation of his work supports his personal views on religion which he believed is outdated for modern society. Based on these two examples, we can say that a good and bad or rather an appropriate and inappropriate interpretation can be distinguished by comparing the interpretation and seeing if it goes against or is in-line with the author's personal views towards the subject of the interpretation such as allegories or religion. An appropriate or “good” interpretation would be in-line with the author's personal views and an inappropriate or “bad” interpretation would be against the author's personal views.

A counter claim would be that an interpretation of a book does not necessarily have to be completely in line with the author's views but rather can complement the views of the author as well as the main message that is trying to be conveyed. An example where this can be seen is *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. The novel was intended to be about how the advancement in more convenient forms of technology such as television and extreme political correctness will eventually cause a decline in reading and people's desire for knowledge however the more popular and widely known interpretation is that it is a book criticizing government censorship, as it is centered around a group which burns books. The more commonly accepted interpretation complements the author's main intent behind the novel therefore it can be considered an

appropriate interpretation of the work. An example of an inappropriate interpretation would be *Starship troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein. *Starship Troopers* was originally published with the intent of criticizing democracy, specifically whether people who are simply born and do not serve their country should be allowed to vote. The work however was instead interpreted to be a satirical representation of fascism and a critique of militarism which goes completely against the views of the author and does not complement his views but rather opposes them directly. This can be considered to be a “bad” or inappropriate interpretation of a work.

When it comes to the natural sciences, an interpretation of data can be considered good if the interpretation has basis in currently accepted scientific facts and/or theories. An example of a good interpretation of data is the link between smoking and lung cancer. The first studies linking smoking and lung cancer that were published in the 1950s were discredited by R.A. Fisher, who said that correlation does not equal causation. Throughout the 50s-60s more studies were conducted which showed that those who smoked more suffered more cases of lung cancer than those who did not smoke as much. Research into the ingredients of cigarettes was also conducted to discover carcinogens that were contained within cigarettes. It was only after this that it was accepted that smoking causes lung cancer based on the data collected in the various studies. This is an example of a good interpretation of data as the initial studies published in the 1950s did not have basis in the scientific knowledge that was present in that time period and more research was needed to be conducted to learn more about carcinogens before saying for sure that there is a causal link and only then could the data in the initial studies be interpreted in that way due to their basis in newly discovered knowledge. This contrasts with a study performed by (Kato & Ishiko, 1964) which is widely known to be an example of a bad interpretation of data due to its lack of scientific evidence to back it up and also being an example of how correlation is not equal to causation. This study looked at a link between picking up heavy objects during manual labor and it's link with stunted growth in children. The results showed a correlation between manual labor and a shorter physical stature however the study did not account for other factors such as poor nutrition that resulted in the poor growth. There was also no explanation of the science of why exactly lifting heavy objects caused stunt growth which makes it a baseless interpretation of the data compared to the lung cancer and smoking studies which provided scientific evidence to back up the interpretation of data collected from that study. Therefore we can say that in the natural sciences, we can distinguish between a good/accurate and bad interpretation as a good/accurate interpretation must be backed up with scientific reasoning that explains the cause of the interpretation compared to a bad/inaccurate interpretation which does not explain the causes of an interpretation and merely establishes a correlation.

A counterclaim for distinguishing a good/accurate and bad/inaccurate interpretation is that a good interpretation does not necessarily need to be entirely based on scientific evidence but can be based partially on reasoning as well. This is especially true in times of emergencies such as covid-19 where the scientific knowledge behind it is not entirely known. An example of this is the investigation into the effectiveness of social distancing and the spread of covid-19. In May 2020, *The New York Times* conducted a study utilizing data collected from smart thermometers which recorded the body temperature of individuals across the US. The data

showed that states which more heavily enforced social distancing had fewer cases of feverish temperature. This helped scientists draw the conclusion that social distancing helps reduce the spread of covid-19 and helped promote stricter measures. This example shows that a good/accurate interpretation in the natural sciences does not necessarily need to be based entirely on scientific knowledge but can also be based on reasoning in conjunction with what knowledge is available at the time and be further refined as new knowledge is gained.

In conclusion, we can distinguish between a good and bad interpretation differently depending on the AOK being looked at. In the arts, an interpretation can be distinguished as “good”/appropriate if it does not go against the personal views of the author. The “good” interpretation does not have to be necessarily what the author is trying to say but can also be complementary to the author’s personal views. We can consider an interpretation to be bad/inappropriate if it goes against the personal views of the author. In the AOK of natural sciences we can distinguish between a good and bad interpretation depending on whether or not the interpretation of gathered data or a study is based on scientific research and whether a causal link is established or is it just a correlation. In times of crisis however, reasoning and intuition can be more relied on as it would be important to quickly create guidelines for the public to follow especially since the crisis is fairly new and little to no past research would be done on it.

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