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- [Latest Additions](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About the Archive](#)
- [Archive Policy](#)
- [History](#)
- [Help](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Journal Eprint Policies](#)
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The Status of Hypothesis and Theory

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Abstract

Nowadays, it is a truism that hypotheses and theories play an essential role in scientific practice. This, however, was far from an obvious given in seventeenth-century British natural philosophy. Different natural philosophers had different views on the role and status of hypotheses and theories, ranging from fierce promotion to bold rejection, and to both they ascribed varying meanings and connotations. The guiding idea of this chapter is that, in seventeenth-century British natural philosophy, the terms 'hypothesis' / 'hypothetical' and 'theory' / 'theoretical' were imbedded in a semantic network of interconnected epistemological and methodological notions – such as 'knowledge', 'method', 'probability', 'certainty', 'induction', 'deduction', 'experimental philosophy', 'speculative philosophy', and the like). As these semantic networks changed overtime, the meaning and significance of 'hypothesis' and 'theory' likewise shifted. Without pretence of completeness, this chapter highlights chronologically some of the defining moments in the semantic transformation of these two terms within the context of seventeenth-century natural philosophy.

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