

Fernandez, A. V. (2022). “Phenomenology, Schizophrenia, and the Varieties of Understanding.” *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 29(1), 17–19. Please quote from published version: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850946>.

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### **Phenomenology, Schizophrenia, and the Varieties of Understanding**

In her article, “Isolated by Oneself: Ontologically Impossible Experiences in Schizophrenia,” Clara Humpston aims to explain what it means to undergo certain experiences that are characteristic of schizophrenia. She labels these experiences “ontologically impossible,” which means that they conflict with commonsensical or historical ideas about what is realistic, comprehensible, or logically defensible to one’s broader community (Humpston XXXX, XX). To clarify, by calling these experiences ontologically impossible, Humpston does not mean that such experiences cannot occur. Rather, she argues that, according to widely held beliefs about the nature of experience and subjectivity, such experiences should not be able to occur. We typically hold, for example, the belief that thoughts and perceptions are inextricably linked with a first-person perspective; for instance, whenever I have a thought or a perception it necessarily appears to me as *my* thought or *my* perception. Humpston’s argument is precisely that people living with schizophrenia have experiences that conflict with these commonly held beliefs about the nature of experience and are therefore misunderstood by one’s community, including by clinicians. And this implies that these commonly held beliefs about the nature of experience are inaccurate or misleading, since schizophrenia provides a kind of counterexample.

At first, it may seem that Humpston’s aim—to explain what it means to undergo these experiences—directly contrasts with Karl Jaspers’ famous claim that schizophrenia is understandable (Jaspers [1913] 1997). This would align her with a number of contemporary phenomenological psychopathologists who believe that Jaspers’ characterization of understanding through empathy is too narrow; many phenomenologists believe that the

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However, in light of some of Humpston's claims throughout her article, I'm not certain how best to characterize her aims. When Humpston says that she aims to explain "what it means" to undergo such experiences (XXXX, XX), what, precisely, does she have in mind? Does explaining the *meaning* of an experience differ from *understanding* an experience? Does it differ from describing *what it's like* to undergo an experience? A key source of my confusion comes at the very end of her introduction, where she writes,

My hope is that by contemplating such questions theorists and clinicians alike will begin to grasp what it is like to be in the grip of the perplexity and paradoxicality intrinsically associated with schizophrenia and to appreciate the patients' realities and truths even without being able to understand them at a subjective level. (Humpston XXXX, XX)

Here, Humpston initially suggests that her aim is to help theorists and clinicians grasp "what it is like" to undergo these ontologically impossible experiences. But, if this is the case, then what does she mean when she says that theorists and clinicians should be able to "appreciate the patients' realities and truths even without being able to understand them at a subjective level" (Humpston XXXX, XX)? It's not immediately clear how one can grasp what it is like to have an experience while, at the very same time, not being able to understand the experience at a subjective level.

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Is this perhaps a distinction between description and understanding? It's certainly plausible that one can describe an experience without understanding it. One might, for instance, describe a particular experience that made one feel uncomfortable without being able to convey precisely what it is about the experience that produced the feeling of discomfort. In this case, the inability to convey the reason for the feeling of discomfort may be indicative of a lack of understanding. If we operate with this distinction, then Humpston seems to be saying that, while she aims to provide a first-person description of the experience of schizophrenia, she does not aim to provide an understanding of this experience, since such an understanding is available only to those who have lived it themselves.

However, Humpston provides a number of (what appear to be) conflicting claims about whether or not schizophrenia can, in fact, be understood by those who have not lived it. Discussing, for instance, how clinicians present themselves as capable of understanding the experience of schizophrenia, she writes,

The truth of the matter is that the clinician does not understand what it is like at all, not even superficially. Unless the clinician has stepped into the patient's solitary world themselves (hence rendering it no longer solitary), they will never understand because striving for understanding is often the wrong goal. The 'understanding' of another mind, even in its weakest interpretation, is simply not achievable in cases of schizophrenia at least from a subjective point of view. If one treats schizophrenia and its sufferers as objects of investigation, for example in a scientific study, then one could say with some confidence that these experiences are *understandable*.

(Humpston XXXX, XX; emphasis in original)

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Her heavy reliance on the phenomenological literature suggests that this might be precisely the kind of scientific approach that she has in mind. But she doesn't rely exclusively on phenomenological accounts to convey what these experiences are like. She supplements phenomenological claims with analogies and metaphors that are apparently intended to convey perplexing and paradoxical experiences that cannot be expressed directly. Describing experiences characteristic of schizophrenia, she says, for example, "Possibilities and impossibilities intertwine like rotating sides of a mirror, but it never settles on one side only," (XXXX, XX) and, "Thoughts and percepts may be merging with one another like molecules diffusing and reacting in a suspension in thin air" (XXXX, XX). Notably, Humpston never provides a concrete description of an individual's experience to illustrate what an ontologically impossible experience is like. She relies, instead, on phenomenological analyses of experiential alterations and metaphors that appear to enhance or supplement these analyses.

In light of this, I want to ask Humpston to clarify the aims of her article. It's certainly intended to provide insight into the experience of schizophrenia and increase the reader's knowledge about ontologically impossible experiences. But is this kind of insight and knowledge somehow different from "understanding"? What is this "subjective level" or

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