

## Book Review

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### Understanding and Conscious Experience. Philosophical and Scientific Perspectives

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When it comes to the most common terms, those that we use on a daily basis, philosophy seems to have a hard time defining them. It is not that we do not have a grasp of those concepts, but rather that we cannot provide a satisfactory definition, one that can easily be generalised and used in different domains. First, it was 'truth'. Then, 'meaning' followed. 'Understanding' had to be on the team as well. These are terms that are used daily, but they also have an important role in the scientific and formal knowledge. Therefore, it is not an unfounded philosophical work, it is a much needed one, that also impacts non-philosophical fields.

'Understanding and Conscious Experience. Philosophical and Scientific Perspectives' edited by Andrei Ionuț Mărășoiu and Mircea Dumitru manages to collect philosophical articles focused on 'understanding'. What is interesting is the fact that the book does not focus solely on an aspect of the term, or on a specific philosophical tradition, but gathers different perspectives that are trying to provide answers to distinct questions. This provides almost an exhaustive image of the philosophical work done around this concept, making this book intriguing both for those newly interested, and for the titrated philosophers.

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As Mărășoiu mentions in the *Introduction*, there are different types and aspects of understanding. Objectual understanding and explanatory understanding are different, since the first one is holistic, while the second is pointed. Also, grammar seems to point out that there must be differences between understanding *that*, understanding *of*, and understanding *why*. In order to capture different dimensions of the concept, the book is divided into three parts. The first one focuses on how can the term be defined, and its links with other terms and fields. The second part links understanding with consciousness. This section includes articles that explain both artistic understanding and understanding transformative experiences. Finally, the third part incorporates articles that are focusing on a specific domain of understanding: from mathematical and formal understanding, to moral understanding, and to scientific one.

When it comes to moral understanding, Kelp supports a systematic knowledge account. This new account avoids the problem of both moral explanationism and moral manipulationism. The new systematic knowledge account of moral understanding is more complex, since it takes into account both understanding *why* and understanding phenomena. The perspective starts from specifying the maximum degree of moral understanding and then moves on to degrees of moral understanding. Therefore:

“Degree of moral understanding of P is a function of distance from maximally systematic knowledge of P: the closer one approximates maximally systematic knowledge of P, the higher one’s degree of moral understanding of P.” (Kelp, 2025, p. 233)

In order to extend the proposal to understanding *why*, the author suggests that moral understanding *why* should be seen as a species of moral understanding of phenomena (Kelp, 2025, p. 234). This perspective seems to work for those that are willing to accept such a reductionism, because, in the end, we seem to have just one type of understanding, namely understanding phenomena. Since understanding *why* is a species of the first kind, the route to reductionism is wide open. Therefore, it might not be suitable for those that want to support the idea that understanding phenomena and understanding *why* differ in kind.

Knowledge seems to be central in understanding other notions. Therefore, some philosophers - for example, Williamson - gave up the classical definition of knowledge, namely the one provided by Plato. The classical definition of knowledge is to understand it as justified true belief. However, as Gettier pointed out, there might be some situations when the definition seems not to work. Therefore, taking knowledge as a primitive notion and using it to define other concepts seems to be an alternative route to the classical perspective. The perspective looks quite

intuitive and helpful when it comes to the philosophical work. However, there are some aspects of this perspective that might not be that intuitive. Dumitru points out that Williamson's idea of being 'cognitively homeless' might not work in all cases.

Williamson considers that there does not exist a central core of mental states. This implies that despite the fact that an agent  $a$  might know that  $p$ , it does not follow that the agent knows that  $a$  knows that  $p$  (Williamson apud Dumitru, 2025, p. 182). Despite the fact that one might agree with the idea that necessarily no proposition is luminous, one might also argue that 'at least some propositions can be luminous for some agents' (Dumitru, 2025, p. 182). The idea that Dumitru argues for in the article is that at least for some contents we might experience semantic or cognitive qualia.

In order to support the claim, Dumitru provides arguments from modal logic and Euclidean geometry. It is easily noticeable that sometimes we might prefer a more intuitive structure or theory over another structure. For example, despite the fact that many-valued non-classical logics are meant to be alternatives to classical (bivalent) logics, the meta-logic of those many-valued logics is expressed using a bivalent logic (Dumitru, 2025, p. 188). It seems that despite the fact that we might be able to build theories or formal systems that give up at least one of the classical logic principles, we are still using those principles to either define the new concepts from those theories, or to do a meta-theoretical analysis of the new perspectives. If we are trying to explain why this happens, we might end up with an explanation as following:

"(...) if we are aware of our familiarity and ease in working with a structure, that might be a mark (or a symptom) of its preeminence (...) In other words, cognitive *qualia strike us* when such representations occur. When a structure is privileged over another structure than with respect to the one that gets represented in it." (Dumitru, 2025, p. 189)

The concept of preeminence seems to support the idea that some things/processes might have cognitive qualia. Dumitru's arguments are clear and well developed in order to support this claim. The question that the author provides a well-argued answer for might have similar answers from different fields. The ones presented in this article come from a formal and mathematical perspective. However, one might find some preferred notions or concepts that are used to define others, based on the fact that they seem more familiar or intuitive. We can simply return where we started, and focus on the so-called primitive concepts. It seems that we are tempted to use *truth*, *meaning*, *knowledge* and other terms, even if we might have other

alternatives. We seem to do so based on the fact that we are more familiar with those and to the structures they are part of. Therefore, Dumitru's idea might be extended beyond the formal approaches.

A transformative experience has effects both on a personal and epistemological level. Such an experience gives a new perspective, it provides new cognitive abilities and it can change your core preferences. Despite the fact that all these explanations use vague terms, the idea remains quite clear: a transformative experience is 'epistemologically relevant in such a way that may trigger a change of identity' (Toboşaru, 2025, p. 150). Toboşaru offers a clear presentation of what a transformative experience might be and its core elements and taxonomies.

The author offers convincing counterarguments for the idea that a transformative experience must be a new kind of experience, not just a token of an old one. It seems quite intuitive that the claim might be false, since new tokens of an already experienced experience might be transformative as well. Let us take a different example from the ones proposed by Toboşaru: the loss of a loved one. We might have previously experienced the death of a loved person, but it might be a specific person's loss that might be truly transformative for us. Of course, someone might consider each loss as a new kind of experience since it involves different persons. However, if we open this route, we might easily argue that each experience that involves something new is a new kind of experience.

The author points out that not all transformative experiences are voluntary or individual. It seems that some interpersonal experiences, or even collective ones might be transformative. For example, starting a revolution is clearly collective and it might turn out to be transformative. According to Toboşaru:

"(...) it is rather more appropriate to think that transformative experiences are rather epistemically transformative and identity transformative, given that the expression 'personal transformative' closes the real possibility of there being also collective transformative experiences." (Toboşaru, 2025, p. 152)

This might be the case. But there can also be a different approach related to this aspect. Despite the fact that someone can argue that there might be collective actions, when it comes to experiences, someone might consider this quite hard to be argued for. It is one thing to inflate an ontology with collective agents - it might be argued that even this is quite problematic - but how can collective experiences be explained? Since an experience seems to be strongly linked to one's brain and one's body, we would need - at least - a collective brain in order to support such collective experiences.

However, the author might have in mind a different perspective: rather than suggesting that there are collective experiences in the sense presented above, he might have suggested that since there are collective actions, a collective experience might be understood as: at least two people facing the same (sensorial/cognitive/or any other type of) input, thus (possibly) having a similar experience. It should also be added that the author mentions collective mystic or religious experiences. For these, the argument mentioned in the previous paragraph might not work, since they seem to differ in kind.

The article ends up with a useful matrix of transformative experiences that sums up the main concepts used.

To conclude, the book edited by Andrei Mărășoiu and Mircea Dumitru covers different questions related to the concept of understanding, questions that come from different philosophical areas, offering a comprehensive image of the work done in the field. The articles included in the book consist of well-developed and well-argued perspectives.

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