

Gießener Abendgespräche – Kognition und Gehirn

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Scientifically Unintelligible Phenomena

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What does it mean for a phenomenon to be scientifically unintelligible? Are there phenomena that will be permanently scientifically unintelligible? In this paper, I develop an account of scientifically unintelligible phenomena in terms of two properties, strangeness and recalcitrance, and argue for two core claims. First, I show that this account challenges a prominent view of scientific understanding, explanationism, by revealing systematic cases it misclassifies. Second, I argue that we cannot in principle know whether a phenomenon will be permanently unintelligible, since the norms, concepts, and perspectives that structure scientific understanding evolve over time. This bears on the limits of our epistemic capacities and on how to frame debates in which the possibility of unintelligibility is at stake.