

# First-Person Science of Consciousness 2025

Ontological Implications for the Understanding  
of Mind and Reality

Alanus University Mannheim, May 15-17, 2025

## Organizers:

Prof. Dr. Christian Tewes

Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann

Prof. Terje Sparby

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**Impressum**  
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# **First-Person Science of Consciousness 2025 – Ontological Implications for the Understanding of Mind and Reality**

Dear Conference Participants,

A very warm welcome to this year's First-Person Science of Consciousness conference! We hope you had a good journey here to Mannheim – especially those coming from further afield (such as India, Japan, and the USA). We are pleased to bring this conference schedule to your attention – with an overview over the 6 keynote lectures, the 14 talks, and two workshops taking place during these days. We are very excited about the range of contributions and look forward to a promising program. You will also find short biographical sketches at the end of this brochure.

On Thursday evening there will be a concert by Iru Mun (piano) and Mathias Demmer (saxophone) – two professional musicians. Following supper, Friday evening is an open space for private arrangement – on page 27, we have included a list of restaurants and snack-bars in Mannheim for your convenience. Mannheim is situated between two rivers, giving it plenty of waterside spots to catch the sunset. The Alanus Hochschule is situated near the quarter Neckarstadt, which boasts a lot of beer gardens, but also quirky cafes and cultural institutions. – Alternatively, we offer a convivial end to the day in the Campus garden, drinks will be provided.

We are delighted to have you here! We look forward to getting to know you and your work and hope you will have a pleasant time in Mannheim. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact any one of the organizers or the student supporters.

With best wishes – on behalf of the conference team:

## **Organizers:**

Christian Tewes, Johannes Wagemann, Terje Sparby, Ulrich Weger

## **Local Organizers:**

Isabel Schmier, Sarah Nobel

# Conference Programme

## Thursday, May 15th

14:00	Large Hall	Welcome by the organizers & introduction to the conference theme Prof. Dr. Christian Tewes & Prof. Dr. Ulrich Weger	
14:30	Large Hall	Keynote 1 <i>How do mind and matter impact each other?</i> Prof. Dr. Tom Froese	
15:30		Talk 1, Large Hall <i>First-person science in teaching</i> Prof. Dr. Ulrich Weger	Talk 2, UG Mitte <i>The first-personal science of rationality and the ontology of the human person</i> Dr. Gustav Melichar
16:15	Foyer	Coffee Break	
16:45		Talk 3, Large Hall <i>Rethinking the pinnacle of the human mind: self-consciousness as a social tool</i> Prof. Dr. Pietro Perconti	Talk 4, UG Mitte <i>Phenomenological constraints on mechanistic explanations in neuropsychiatry</i> Prof. Dr. Marcin Moskalewicz & Dr. Marek Pokropski
17:30	Large Hall	Keynote 2 <i>Toward a scientific taxonomy of meditative endpoints. Extremes of human experience and development and the case of Nirvana</i> Prof. Dr. Terje Sparby	
18:30	Canteen	Dinner-Break	
20:00	Large Hall	Concert	

## Friday, May 16th

09:00	Large Hall	<b>Keynote 3</b> <i>Experiencing Indigenous healing techniques: Inspiration for the first-person study of consciousness</i> <b>Dr. Radmila Lorencova &amp; Prof. Dr. Radek Trnka</b>	
10:00		<b>Talk 5, Large Hall</b> <i>Moral detection and ranging</i> <b>PD Dr. Werner Moskopp</b>	<b>Talk 6, UG Mitte</b> <i>Consciousness-centric reality: a model of external reality as a symbolic interface for alternate inner states of being</i> <b>Dr. Martin Schmalzried</b>
10:45	Foyer	Coffee Break	
11:15	Large Hall	<b>Keynote 4</b> <i>Does intentionality connect us to the external world? (And, if so, how?)</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Angela Mendelovici</b>	
12:15		<b>Talk 7, Large Hall</b> <i>Three forms of skepticism about self-experience, one alternative? An argument from self-familiarity</i> <b>Dr. Philipp Schmidt-Boddy</b>	<b>Talk 8, UG Mitte</b> <i>Acquaintance and the meta-problem of consciousness. How conscious systems ground their own evidential presence.</i> <b>Yannik Steinebrunner, B.A.</b>
13:00	Canteen	Lunch	
14:00	UG Mitte	<b>Workshop</b> <i>First-person science as inner development for sustainability</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Pascal Frank</b>	
15:00	Large Hall	<b>Keynote 5</b> <i>Consciousness and first-person reflection</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Charles Siewert</b>	
16:00	Foyer	Coffee Break	
16:30		<b>Talk 9, Large Hall</b> <i>Birth and death as limit problems for a first-person-study of consciousness</i> <b>Daniel Stil, M.A.</b>	<b>Talk 10, UG Mitte</b> <i>You can feel the change - The role of consciousness for affective niche construction and its implications for the ontology of social identities</i> <b>Daniel Vespermann, M.A.</b>
17:30	Large Hall	<b>Workshop</b> <i>Methods in the first-person science of consciousness</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Ulrich Weger &amp; Prof. Dr. Terje Sparby</b>	
18:30	Canteen	Dinner	

## Saturday, May 17th

09:00	Large Hall	<b>Keynote 6</b> <i>Clarifying the role of mental agency in participatory reality formation</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann</b>	
10:00		<b>Talk 11, Large Hall</b> <i>The problem of reality in the history of psychology</i> <b>Dr. Alexander Nicolai Wendt</b>	<b>Talk 12, UG Mitte</b> <i>Enacting dragons: first and second-person approaches to the anthropological study of spiritual entities</i> <b>Dr. Yuki Imoti</b>
10:45	Foyer	<b>Coffee Break</b>	
11:15		<b>Talk 13, Large Hall</b> <i>How memory persists: A post-trace answer to the hard question of memory</i> <b>Zixuan Liu, M.A.</b>	<b>Talk 14, UG Mitte</b> <i>Free will, first-person perspective, and agent causation</i> <b>Prof. Dr. Christian Tewes</b>
12:00	Large Hall	<b>Conclusion</b> <b>Prof. Dr. Terje Sparby</b> <b>Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann</b>	
13:00	Canteen	<b>Lunch</b>	

# Abstracts

→ Thursday, May 15th

Keynote 1, 14:30, Large Hall

## **How do mind and matter impact each other?**

**Prof. Dr. Tom Froese**

Cognitive science is beset by a number of fundamental anomalies that derive from the unsolved mind-body problem. Most prominent are the problem of mental causation and the hard problem of consciousness. I propose to accept these explanatory gaps at face value, and to take them as positive indications of a non-dual relation: mind and matter are one, but they are not the same. They are mutually related in an efficacious, yet also non-reducible, non-observable, and even non-intelligible, manner. Hence, for the natural sciences, the embodied mind becomes equivalent to a hidden 'black box' that is coupled to bodily processes. In accordance with the bidirectionality of this 'black box', two concepts are introduced: (1) irruption denotes unobservable mind hiddenly making a difference to observable matter, and (2) absorption denotes observable matter hiddenly making a difference to unobservable mind. In this talk I will analyze these two concepts from the side of first-person phenomenology, focusing on the irruption of affectivity and on absorbed coping. A surprising outcome is that, instead of the traditional assumption of structural isomorphism, irruption and absorption from mind to matter, and vice versa, relate to each other with a structural twist. This complementary pairing of mutual impact presents a novel argument in favor of a diversification of ontology.

Talk 1, 15:30, Room: Large Hall

## **First-person science in teaching**

**Prof. Dr. Ulrich Weger**

First-person methods are universally used in psychology and neighboring sciences – but often in a “hidden” form that can become particularly problematic when the researcher’s agenda has an inadvertent impact on the research process. We have developed a training in empirical self-exploration that allows psychology-students and beginning researchers to explore psychological processes and theories in their own life and alerts them to the potential challenges of unreflected subjectivity in their research. We introduce this approach and evaluate its impact. We present data from 18 qualitative interviews of students who have participated in the training and draw implications for the teaching of psychology and related disciplines. We also discuss the relevance of first-person data in promoting more saturated hypotheses and in allowing internal cross-validations of empirical research data, thereby increasing the general replicability of research findings and placing studies on psychological subjectivity on a more solid ontological basis.

Talk 2, 15:30, Room: UG Mitte

## **The first-personal science of rationality and the ontology of the human person.**

**Dr. Gustav Melichar**

Jerry Fodor (1996) has distinguished three problems for ontological naturalism from the philosophy of mind: 1) qualitative consciousness, 2) intentionality, and 3) rationality. Rationality extends the twofold intentional relation of the mind to its object by adding the dimension of rule-following: Some intentional acts accord to rules of rationality, others do not. Computer technology and so-called AI systems, though, have modeled rule-governed symbol processing so that authors like Chalmers think that the underlying functionalist models solve the problem of rationality.

In my talk, I will argue that the functionalist approach to rationality is misguided and that rational thought shows an intricate and subtle relationship to the first-person perspective. For this, I will analyze the Kripke-Ross argument for immaterial aspects of thought (Ross 1992, 2008). I will demonstrate that this argument does provide a defeater for functionalism (and a fortiori for ontological naturalism) about rationality. However, a thorough analysis shows that it rests on an assumption about the first-personal character of rule-following. Explicating this will provide grounds for a first-personal science of rational thought, as Husserl has developed throughout his work (Husserl 1999, 1981, 2009). Further, I will argue that it serves as a premise in the ontology of the human person, following Merleau-Ponty (1966) and Sokolowski (2008).

Talk 3, 16:45, Room: Large Hall

## **Rethinking the pinnacle of the human mind: self consciousness as a social toll**

**Prof. Dr. Pietro Perconti**

Self-consciousness is often romanticized as the pinnacle of human mind, a trait that defines the uniqueness and depth of the human spirit. However, this view misinterprets its role. Evidence indicates that self-consciousness did not evolve for its own sake, but as a tool to improve social cognition. Instead of an elaborate inner life driving our ability to coordinate with others, it is the need for effective social interaction that shaped the development of self-consciousness. Conceptual self-consciousness, unlike its non-conceptual counterpart, is intrinsically tied to social cognition. From logical, evolutionary, and developmental psychological perspectives, it serves as a subordinate mechanism that supports the demands of social interaction. Social cognition requires an internal workspace capable of simulating interactions, and this workspace is what we experience introspectively as the sense of self-consciousness.

This reframes self-consciousness not as an isolated pinnacle of the human mind, but as an efficient by-product of our social nature. The ability to model interactions, predict responses, and adapt behavior relies on the inner logical space created by self-consciousness. Far from being an end in itself, it is a means to enhance the complexity and success of social coordination. Recognizing this shifts our understanding, dismantling the romanticized notion of self-consciousness and situating it within the broader framework of cognitive and social evolution.

Talk 4, 16:45, Room: UG Mitte

## **Phenomenological constraints on mechanistic explanations in neuropsychiatry**

**Prof. Dr. Marcin Moskalewicz, Dr. Marek Pokropski**

The recently proposed explanatory framework for cognitive neuroscience relies on the integration of results from various research domains, which constrain an explanatory mechanistic model. The success of an explanation thus depends on the quality and validity of methodologically diverse restrictions that contribute to the specification of the mechanism being sought. Less attention has been given to constraints provided by first-person experience using phenomenological methods. In the case of multifaceted mental phenomena, such as mental disorders, studying subjective experience is crucial for their explanation. The typical epistemological trouble here is the lack of reliability of first-person descriptions, which translates into their low natural-scientific utility. In this talk, we focus on how improving the reliability of lived experience analysis originating in phenomenology can contribute to explanations in neuropsychiatry, with a special focus on temporal experience. Specifically, we discuss how mixed-methods designs originating in both a priori phenomenological exploration of the structures of felt time and qualitative-phenomenological tools that we develop can lead to quantifying data on lived experience. Consequently, we argue for a quantitative shift in phenomenology that allows for a deeper understanding of phenomena (such as implicit timing) and their representation on ordinal and interval scales, thus enabling statistical analysis of underlying patterns. We present this both as a logistical and methodological challenge that, when appropriately tackled, may result in an operational rating system that expands the currently available means of appropriating first-person data as constraints for mechanistic explanations.

Keynote 2, 17:30, Room: Large Hall

## **Extremes of human experience and development and the case of nirvana**

**Prof. Dr. Terje Sparby**

Meditation, in particular advanced meditation, develops toward meditative endpoints, sometimes referred to metaphorically as awakening. A well-known instance of such an endpoint is called nibbana or nirvana. The present study outlines a hermeneutically developed conceptual framework that serves to inform and guide ongoing qualitative, micro-phenomenological and neuroscientific investigations. Contemporary mindfulness teachers and different Buddhist traditions present different views of nirvana. Some define nirvana as the ultimate reality beyond awareness, while others define it as liberated or pure awareness itself. Some descriptions of nirvana focus on cessations (and particularly the cessation of suffering) and others based on affirmations (e.g., ultimate happiness). Nirvana has also been defined as ineffable, or as being characterized by paradox. These, and other, different views and descriptions of nirvana make it challenging to understand this construct, and to establish a science of advanced meditation and meditative endpoints. Here we propose an integrated taxonomy that unifies the different views and descriptions. The taxonomy differentiates between ways of entry into nirvana, nirvana itself, and the impact of nirvana. Awakening is thus understood as a many-faceted process. The proposed taxonomy provides an ontologically neutral unified view of meditative endpoints, a framework for differentiating distinct approaches toward those meditative endpoints, and a starting point for investigating awakening beyond the case of nirvana.

→ Friday, May 16th

Keynote 3, 9:00, Room: Large Hall

**Experiencing Indigenous healing techniques:**

**Inspiration for the first-person study of consciousness**

**Dr. Radmila Lorencova & Prof. Dr. Radek Trnka**

The relatively recent decolonial turn has enriched contemporary scientific discourse about insights arising from Indigenous philosophies. Indigenous people formed their understanding of consciousness based on first-person experience during rituals as well as various everyday activities. On this experiential background, diverse ideas about the nature of the mind and consciousness emerged. While some Indigenous cultures understand consciousness in ways similar to contemporary scientific psychology, others developed different ideas about how consciousness can be operationalised. Some Indigenous cultures see consciousness as a type of energy, a vital force, a kind of being or a capacity to respond to communicative signals. Traditional Indigenous healing techniques are often used by psychotherapists and clinical psychologists in a Western context. Western clients and often the psychotherapists themselves do not share the same cultural origin as the Indigenous healing techniques. The question then arises: how can Western clients experience psychotherapy inspired by Indigenous forms of healing? How can changes in perceptual and mental states induced by Indigenous healing techniques influence one's relationship to the world? The first-person experiences of Western clients are a very interesting source of insights into what effects the application of Indigenous healing techniques may have in clients whose minds were shaped by a non-Indigenous cultural environment. These direct experiences are highly variable, showing the fine-grained nuances of conscious activity of participants. Interestingly, experiences of Indigenous healing techniques have caused long-term changes in Western clients' ontological understanding of reality as well as in their understanding of the relationship between body and mind.

Talk 5, 10:00, Room: Large Hall

**Moral detection and ranging**

**PD Dr. Werner Moskopp**

This paper highlights the primacy of the first-person perspective in moral decision making. Through a brief archaeological exploration, I outline a genealogy from Zeno Vendler's anchored I-Perspective, through Carnap's methodological solipsism, to Schelling's hypothesis of a positive philosophy. Secondly, I argue that these philosophical traditions, including empiricism, constructivism, and phenomenology, implicitly acknowledge a fundamental mind-dependence for moral philosophy. Drawing inspiration from Plato's 'The Road to Larissa' (Meno), I would like to propose an ethical tool for moral decision-making, called 'The Modar,' which integrates the theory of resistance (Brehm) with an utilitarian calculus, thereby prioritizing the first-person horizon of knowledge and belief. Based on this framework, I would like to bring up the following point for our discussion: contemporary (moral) sciences often still operate within a common-sense paradigm of stance independent values which raises concerns about the compatibility of robust realism with our democratic values.

Talk 6, 10:00, Room: UG Mitte

## **Consciousness-centric reality: A model of external reality as a symbolic interface for alternate inner states of being**

**Dr. Martin Schmalzried**

This paper presents a theory derived from Simondon's philosophy of individuation, which rests on the idea that an individual and his associated milieu are actualized simultaneously through the process of individuation. In other words, any externally perceived reality is co-emergent with the individual. On this basis, this paper explores the idea that perceived space or external reality is fundamentally a symbolic representation of potential alternate states of being for a network of conscious agents. It posits that what conscious agents experience as external reality is an emergent shared interface facilitating transitions between discrete inner states of being. Spatial relationships and interactions are interpreted as manifestations of potential state transitions, either through direct agent-to-agent interactions or via interface-mediated processes. The model shows how a coherent, seemingly objective spatial reality can emerge from the collective agreement on inner rules/limitations set by a network of conscious agents, despite being fundamentally subjective in nature, echoing Whitehead's process philosophy. The implications of this theory are very diverse, challenging conventional notions of objectivity, causality, and the nature of physical reality. It suggests a deep interconnectedness of conscious agents and the outer perceived reality. Furthermore, it offers potential new approaches to understanding quantum phenomena, the nature of time, and the relationship between mind and matter.

Keynote 4, 11:15, Room: Large Hall

## **Does intentionality connect us to the external world? (And, if so, how?)**

**Prof. Dr. Angela Mendelovici**

Intentionality—very roughly, the „aboutness“ or „directedness“ of mental states—is often thought to play two roles in the mind. The first is a cognitive role: our intentional states' contents are supposed to be thought, experienced, or otherwise entertained; they are supposed to be used in reasoning, affect behaviour, and constitute our first-person perspective on the world. The second is a representational role: our intentional states are supposed to secure an epistemically meaningful connection to the world (or a connection contingent on the world meeting certain conditions), perhaps by determining conditions of truth and reference. Some precisifications of the definition of „intentionality“ take it to be whatever plays the cognitive role, while others take it to be whatever plays the representational role. This is unproblematic if we can safely assume that one and the same thing plays both roles. However, I argue that it is an open theoretical possibility that the two roles are played by distinct things and so that different definitions of „intentionality“ pick out different things. To argue for this claim, I consider various views in the literature of what plays the cognitive role and argue that what plays this role might not also play the representational role. I close by briefly offering a positive picture on which what plays both roles is a pair of distinct but related phenomena. If this picture is correct, merely entertaining a content might not automatically connect our mental states to reality in any epistemically interesting way. Instead, further facts about the mind allow for this connection. I make some suggestions as to what it would take to make such epistemically meaningful contact.

Talk 7, 12:15, Room: Large Hall

## **Three forms of skepticism about self-experience, one alternative?**

### **An argument from self-familiarity**

**Dr. Philipp Schmidt-Boddy**

As a perennial topos, the nature of selfhood remains one of the most discussed subjects. How should we talk about selfhood? How should we even start to define or determine what selfhood is? Associated with these basic questions is a set of further issues, which are no less controversial: Can experience tell us what selfhood is? And how can we investigate self-experience without having a pre-established notion of selfhood that tells us what qualifies as self-experience to begin with? In my talk, I shed light on these questions by focusing on skepticism about self-experience. I distinguish three forms of denying that self-experience is informative with regard to the nature of selfhood in a relevant sense: denying that we enjoy self-experience at all, denying that self-experience is anything more than mere appearance, denying that self-experience tells us anything beyond the fact that selfhood is real. Having identified these three forms of skepticism about self-experience, I explore which alternative views about self-experience remain an option and develop an argument from a specific philosophical notion of self-familiarity that I will introduce.

Talk 8, 12:15, Room: UG Mitte

## **Acquaintance and the Meta-Problem of Consciousness. How conscious systems ground their own evidential presence.**

**Yannick Steinebrunner, B.A.**

The meta-problem of consciousness is the problem of how to explain our intuited sense of the hard problem. Most meta-problem theories are explanatorily unsatisfying. The reason, I argue, is that they are underdetermined with regard to their explanandum, i.e. they lack clarity on what the „sense of the hard problem” specifically consists in. Since this underdetermination problem is primarily rooted in methodological issues, my talk pursues two aims: (a) to suggest and apply a proper method – the method of „descriptive intuition analysis” (DIA) – to carve out what the meta-problem of consciousness consists in its core, and (b) to establish constraints for theories attempting to explain it.

Despite the absence of empirical data, DIA strongly suggests that the central intuitions underlying the hard problem are positive first-person access intuitions, characterized by their (self-)presenting and impenetrable nature. In the case of phenomenal intuitions, these properties manifest with unparalleled epistemological strength, rendering the problem best described in terms of acquaintance. Only evidential theories – according to which cognitive systems represent their own states by employing certain evidential models – seem to be capable of accounting for the distinctive features of acquaintance. However, no fully satisfying evidential model has been developed thus far, and I will offer a speculative proposal for how such a model might be constructed.

Workshop, 14:00, Room: Large Hall

## **First-person science as inner development for sustainability**

**Prof. Dr. Pascal Frank**

Recently, there has been a growing interest in concepts such as “inner worlds,” “inner development,” and “inner transformation” related to sustainability. Scholars argue that prevailing approaches to sustainability challenges are deeply rooted in an instrumental, positivist paradigm. These approaches prioritize external manifestations of unsustainability and focus on solutions framed within socio-economic structures, governance dynamics, and technological innovation. Therefore, they overlook individuals’ inner worlds as root causes of the sustainability crisis and fail to recognize inner change as profound leverage points for addressing this crisis.

In this workshop, we explore why such an interpretation of inner development is characterized by the very positivist-instrumental paradigm it claims to transcend. Specifically, it relies on quasi-objective descriptions of external unsustainability and prescribes definitive outcomes and pathways for inner change. Consequently, practices and activities related to inner change are frequently conceptualized as mere ‘tools’ for achieving predetermined outer changes instead of emphasizing the intrinsic value of engaging with one’s inner world.

In response, we establish a phenomenological approach toward inner worlds and inner development, prioritizing the lived experience of individuals and their subjective representations of the external world as the foundation for understanding (un-)sustainability. The workshop consists of a theoretical part introducing this phenomenological approach, followed by activities illustrating its applicability in sustainability-related contexts. These activities focus on obtaining access to unconscious, pre-reflexive facets of one’s subjective experience related to (un-)sustainability. Such a phenomenological inquiry becomes a practice of inner development itself, leading to increased response-ability and self-determination vis-à-vis one’s inner and hence outer world.

Keynote 5, 15:00, Room: Large Hall

## **Consciousness and first-person reflection**

**Prof. Dr. Charles Siewert**

It has been argued that the unreliability of introspective judgments shows we need to identify non-introspectively the conditions under which they are accurate, or else they will fall to a general skeptical doubt. Against this, I make a case that the evidence that introspection suffers from sources of error specific to it is much weaker than is supposed, and we would go badly wrong if we refused to rely on it until it can be externally vindicated. We are entitled to accord first-person reflection on experience a “selective provisional trust”. If we don’t, we risk undermining the conditions under which our consciousness is intelligible to us at all, and we deprive ourselves of legitimate forms of inquiry. This use of reflection can vindicate and elucidate the idea that consciousness is “subjective” in an important sense: it is essentially suited for subjective understanding and curiosity, and is always “for” some subject. This sets constraints on what can count as a satisfactory account of its nature.

Talk 9, 16:30, Room: Large Hall

## **Birth and death as limit problems for a first-person-study of consciousness**

**Daniel Stil, M.A.**

Birth and death signify liminal yet central problems for any study of consciousness from the first-person-perspective. The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl infamously claimed that consciousness can neither be born nor die. As a transcendental condition of temporal experience, consciousness cannot be subject to temporal events in the world like birth and death. Therefore, Husserl found it paradoxical that, on the one hand, I must believe that my experiential life will always go on, whereas, on the other hand, I empirically know that my death is pending. This paradox is resolved by ascribing birth and death only to the human subject in the world, not to pure consciousness itself. However, since this solution leaves us with two incompatible accounts of consciousness, the paradox and its presuppositions have to be reconsidered. In my talk I will discuss this paradox and its implications for our conceptions of consciousness and reality. Firstly, I briefly analyze Husserl's argument for the immortality of consciousness on a static and genetic level. Secondly, I criticize Husserl's position with reference to the necessarily embodied nature of consciousness. Since Husserl's argument for immortality rests on a separation of pure temporal form and empirical temporal content, an embodied account will not allow for a purely formal consciousness. Therefore, thirdly, I suggest that even within 'pure' experience there must be a lingering awareness of our own natality and mortality, of belonging to the world. Embodied experience signifies an ambiguous experience between birth and death, which is somehow paradoxical, but nothing to be resolved.

Talk 10, 16:30, Room: UG Mitte

## **You can feel the change: The role of consciousness for affective niche construction and its implications for the ontology of social identities**

**Daniel Vespermann, M.A.**

Although 4E approaches to cognition and affectivity share main assumptions with the phenomenological tradition, the former are largely silent on how phenomenal consciousness contributes to the integration of the mind and the sociomaterial environment. Oftentimes, diachronic alignment of (neuro)cognitive structures and sensorimotor capacities with the environment plays a pivotal role in explaining this integration; phenomenologically speaking: "habitualization" or "incorporation". However, it is not clear whether such alignments require consciousness.

In this talk, I will investigate how consciousness is involved in affective incorporation and coordination processes, also termed "affective niche construction". Originally developed as a framework for understanding selection pressures in evolutionary biology, applying the concept of niche construction to affective phenomena describes the modification of the sociomaterial environment to elicit and regulate affective states.

I suggest understanding affective niche construction from the first-person perspective as a process of affective familiarization and that incorporated niches amount to a feeling of familiarity. Recent research in cognitive psychology understands the feeling of familiarity as "attention flip" between introspective search for similar past scenarios and heightened awareness of environmental cues. I will argue that this renders consciousness indispensable for familiarization and emphasizes the role of the experiencing subject in affective niche construction.

As affective niche construction often involves other people or sociocultural factors, emphasizing the role of consciousness for familiarization has implications for the ontology of social collectives and their cohesion. I will outline how affective familiarization provides a parsimonious and “mentalistic” explanation for the consolidation and change of social identities.

## → Saturday, May 17th

Keynote 6, 9:00, Room: Large Hall

### **Clarifying the role of mental agency in participatory reality formation**

**Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann**

While agency is undisputably relevant for shaping our cultural environments, the role of mental agency is far more unclear here and in the broader context of reality formation. Already the question of what might be ‘natural’ reality and how it is originally given to us cannot be completely answered without considering consciousness. And the relationship of consciousness to reality cannot be consistently grasped without admitting some form of mental agency, as it would otherwise amount to a purely receptive representationalism. Although the latter option seems to have become outdated in recent years, mental activity is still often equated with brain activity and conscious access to it is denied. However, empirical first-person research on cognitive processes shows that these might be constituted, at least at a participatory level, by specific micro-activities that are (potentially) conscious to and controllable by individual mental agents. This is supported, on the one hand, by study results connecting qualitative first-person data and statistically validated structures, and, on the other, by structure-phenomenological interpretation of these results in the context of psychophysical correlations. While mental micro-activities are accompanied by ‘inner agentive qualia’, stimulus-related experiences include ‘functionally negative qualia’ both of which play decisive roles in a cross-domain scenario of reality formation including not only brain processes but also dynamics of embodiment and situated embeddedness of action. Formalized by transclassical logics, this picture even allows to be extended to a cosmological-evolutional dimension suggesting that consciousness and mental agency are integral parts and participatory factors of reality.

Talk 11, 10:00, Room: Large Hall

### **The problem of reality in the history of psychology**

**Dr. Alexander Nicolai Wendt**

All sciences grapple with philosophical problems, particularly when defining their subject matter. For psychology, this involves addressing the philosophical problem of reality. Since the rise of Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy, the debate between idealism and realism has shaped approaches to this issue. These differing perspectives have, in turn, influenced possible frameworks for scientific psychology. A third perspective, ideal-realism, offers an alternative to idealism and realism but has not been fully explored in philosophical history. Emerging from Romanticism and evolving through the 19th century, ideal-realism introduced a unique approach to psychology. Novalis, an early Romantic thinker, referred to this as Realpsychologie, emphasizing a synthesis of ideal and real

aspects of human experience. This investigation aims to trace the development of ideal-realism and examine its contribution to Realpsychologie. The study identifies three distinct phases in this tradition: its Romantic beginnings, Wilhelm Dilthey's contributions, and its transformation into what is termed object-phenomenology. By exploring these stages, the study reveals how ideal-realism addressed the problem of reality, laying the groundwork for a nuanced approach to psychology that bridges the gap between philosophical idealism and realism.

Talk 12, 10:00, Room: UG Mitte

## **Enacting dragons: First and second-person approaches to the anthropological study of spiritual entities**

**Dr. Yuki Imoto**

Recent anthropological research on ritual practice places importance on considering the affective experience of the ritual process itself, and on how healing and transformation is an embodied, intercorporeal experience that requires an attunement and enskillment of attention into the cultural 'space' or what the Japanese biologist Minakata Kumagusu calls 'tact'. In this paper, I describe my own ethnographic practice of attunement and enskillment in entering mythic ontological fields in the endeavour of "taking different worlds seriously". I consider how ethnography itself can become a contemplative practice that leads to enskillment into certain ways of seeing, listening, being in the world which the psychological anthropologist Csordas calls 'somatic modes of attention'.

I introduce qualitative data based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews mainly in the Miura and Izu Peninsula regions of Eastern Japan, where dragon worship and ritual is inscribed in history, in Shinto and Buddhist monuments, as well as in the everyday realities of certain local communities and networks of this region. I consider why "dragons matter" and how it comes to matter for the interlocuters and for myself, in the larger context of the region's geopolitics and ecological, animist discourse. Through this ethnographic endeavour, I explore the potential of ethnographic experience as an education of attention and consciousness transformation-translation.

Talk 13, 11:15, Room: Large Hall

## **How memory persists: A post-trace answer to the hard question of memory**

**Zixuan Liu, M.A.**

How does memory persist? An answer to this hard question of memory should move beyond the trace metaphor, which is a threefold reification of persistent memory: it fails to account for mnemonic reconstruction in a causal network, the intrinsic intentionality and the intrinsic subjectivity of memory. My post-trace answer consists of three parts. First, memory persists reconstructively in a power-causal network. Persistent memory is the manifestation of various past and present powers and itself a power for further manifestations. Second, memory persists while fluctuating between consciousness and unconsciousness, depending on its relation to agency. A persistent memory is conscious only if the memorized past provides a differentiated reason for possible actions. Otherwise, the memorized past guides actions unconsciously as an undifferentiated part of the memorized past in general. I postulate an all-sweeping power of compressive integration to explain the formation of the memorized past in general. Finally, memory persists in a person-constitutive manner. A memory-based account personal identity

should learn three lessons from the risk of circularity. Persistent memory is a better metaphysical contributor to personal identity than recollection. A non-circular account should start with pre-mnemonic intentional state that becomes memory by persisting in the memory-distinctive manner. The last lesson is to differentiate between various subject notions relevant for memory.

Talk 14, 11:15, Room: UG Mitte

## **Free will, first-person perspective, and agent causation**

**Prof. Dr. Christian Tewes**

Protagonists in the free will debate have repeatedly emphasized that an important explanatory base of free will consists in first-person access to mental and bodily states and events. Free will would require – according to this view – at least a weak form of introspective self-knowledge that ensures, for instance, the ascription of a reason-based decision process to myself (the agent) at the personal level of description. What exactly does this imply? In which sense can first-person based research contribute to the elucidation of free will as, for instance, in the mentioned decision-making process or by performing a reason-based action? These questions will be explored in my talk especially with regard to the concept of agent causation, and by integrating an ontology of powers that has been developed in the philosophy of science in the last decades. First, I argue that the causal theory of action cannot sufficiently specify main ingredients of free will such as self-forming acts, the control of an action or the processual character of mental activities. Second, I show to what extent a solution to these challenges requires the inclusion of an ontology of powers and agent causation as they are currently discussed in contrast to the leading regularity theory of causation. Thirdly, I discuss how first-personally based explorations of mental activities – conceived as manifestations of powers – can make an important contribution to the exploration of free will. Finally, I conclude with a brief prospect on how this approach can be related to third-person based research on free will.

## Biographies

**Pascal Frank** is an assistant professor for inner development and sustainability at Wageningen University & Research. He holds degrees from the Fernuniversität Hagen, University of Fribourg, and the University of Cambridge. Pascal received his Ph.D. from Leuphana University Lüneburg on intrapersonal sustainability competencies, followed by postdoctoral research at Arizona State University and Stanford University. He also worked for the German Environment Agency, where he established an International Academy for sustainability transformations. His research focuses on the role of inner development in sustainability and fostering inner development within both formal and informal educational settings. For this purpose, he draws upon first-personal research methods and introspective learning activities.

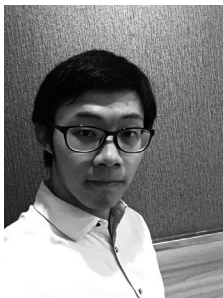


**Tom Froese** is Associate Professor at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology, a cognitive scientist with a background in computer science and complex systems. He investigates the interactive basis of life and mind with a variety of methods, including evolutionary robotics, agent-based modeling, sensory substitution interfaces, artificial neural networks, and virtual reality. He is particularly known for his contributions to the field of artificial life and to the enactive approach to cognitive science.



**Yuki Imoto** is associate professor in Liberal Arts and Foreign Languages at Keio University's Faculty of Science and Technology, Japan. Yuki holds a doctorate in social anthropology from the University of Oxford and has been conducting ethnographic research in educational fields and processes of transformative learning. In 2024, Yuki founded the Centre for Contemplative Studies within Keio University. Her current interest is in bridging the realms of spirituality, art, and science through contemplative approaches to research and education, and she is currently writing an autoethnographic monograph about this journey.





**Zixuan Liu** is a PhD candidate at the Husserl-Archive of Cologne. He wrote his dissertation on 'Husserl's broadened notion of the will and its significance for action theory' (summa cum laude) under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Jagna Brudzinska. He obtained the bachelor and master degree at Sun-Yat-Sen University with theses on Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity and attention. Currently, he works on Husserl's idea of absolute individuation and its phenomenological/analytic metaphysical implications. His research interests include phenomenology, action theory, analytic metaphysics and neuroscience.



**Radmila Lorencova** is a cultural anthropologist focusing on ritual and its relationship to consciousness. Her research explores various concepts of consciousness within Indigenous cultures, as well as the impact of ritual on individuals in Western society. She examines how different cultural frameworks shape the understanding of consciousness and the role ritual plays in influencing both personal and collective experiences and identities.



**Hannes Gustav Melichar, Dr. phil.,** is currently Postdoctoral Associate at the Heidelberg University Hospital. His research project "The Nature or Reasonable Abilities" is funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Research foci: philosophy of psychology, phenomenology and enactivism, Classical German Philosophy, and philosophy of religion.  
[www.uni-heidelberg.academia.edu/GustavMelichar](http://www.uni-heidelberg.academia.edu/GustavMelichar)

**Angela Mendelovici** is Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Western University (The University of Western Ontario). Her research is in the philosophy of mind, especially on consciousness and intentionality. She has authored *The Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality* (OUP, 2018), in which she argues for a view of intentionality on which a subject's mental contents are determined by their phenomenal properties. She has also written on representational theories of perception, causal theories of representation, representationalism about moods and emotions, perspectival experiences, olfactory experiences, and debunking arguments.



**Marcin Moskalewicz**, PhD, DSc, works at the intersection of phenomenology, psychiatry, and computational approaches to lived experience, esp. the lived experience of time and clinical judgment of schizophrenia (the *Praecox Feeling*). Moskalewicz studied and worked at several universities in Europe (Groningen, Poznan, Zurich, Heidelberg, Oxford) and in the US (Berkeley, Texas A&M). He is currently Associate Professor at Poznan University of Medical Sciences and Marie-Curie Slodowska University in Lublin (both in Poland) as well as convenor of the Phenomenology and Mental Health Network, The Collaborating Centre for Values-based Practice in Health and Social Care, St. Catherine's College, Oxford. Recently published books: „Hannah Arendt's Ambiguous Storytelling“ (Bloomsbury 2024); „Phenomenological Neuropsychiatry“, ed. (Springer 2024).



**Werner Moskopp** is a lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Koblenz. He is a researcher on several topics of moral philosophy, applied ethics, pragmatism, methodology (in cultural studies), epistemology in Kant and German Idealism, philosophy of the (long) 19th century. For a complete list of references see: [www.orcid.org/0000-0001-8814-3732](http://www.orcid.org/0000-0001-8814-3732)





**Pietro Perconti** is Professor of Philosophy of Mind at the University of Messina. His main research areas include consciousness, social cognition, and the social role of cognitive science. His first book is dedicated to the history of ideas (Kantian Linguistics, 1999). The last two—co-authored with Alessio Plebe—are: *The Future of the Artificial Mind* (CRC, 2022) and *The Turing's Vision. How AI is Shaping the World* (CRC, 2025). He is also a co-founder of the ICCS, The International Center for Consciousness Studies [www.hardproblem.it](http://www.hardproblem.it)



**Marek Pokropski** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw. His research interests include phenomenology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of cognitive science. His latest book, *Mechanisms and Consciousness: Integrating Phenomenology with Cognitive Science* (Routledge, 2021), explores the integration of first-person approaches to consciousness with neuroscience.



**Martin Schmalzried** holds a Master's Degree from the ULB (Brussels) in Political Science and is a licensed sociology teacher in upper secondary education. He is currently pursuing a PhD at University College Dublin in the School of Information and Communications Studies on assessing whether governance in centralized and decentralized metaverse can help overcome alienation, within the context of Simondon's philosophy of individuation.

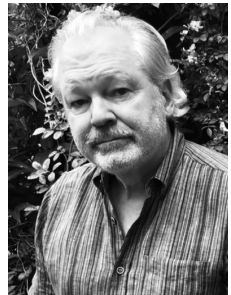
**Philipp Schmidt-Boddy** is a philosopher and psychologist, currently a post-doctoral researcher at Heidelberg University and a member of the Section for Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy. His research focuses on phenomenology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychiatry, and philosophical psychology, with particular interest in selfhood, emotional experience, intersubjectivity, and agency. His work integrates phenomenological traditions with contemporary philosophy and empirical research in psychology and psychiatry. After completing degrees in philosophy and psychology at the University of Vienna, he received a PhD in philosophy from Heidelberg University. Prior to his current position, he held research fellowships at the University of Würzburg, TU Darmstadt, University of Vienna, and University of Graz.



**Isabel Schmier, M.A.**, is lecturer for Creative Speech and Theatre at Alanus University, Campus Mannheim. She studied English and American Studies at Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg and the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK, as well as Spoken Arts at the State University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart. In addition to her lecturing position at Alanus, she regularly performs as voice actor and teaches opera students at Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts.



**Charles Siewert** is Robert Alan and Kathryn Dunlevie Hayes Professor of Humanities and Philosophy at Rice University. He is the author of *The Significance of Consciousness* (Princeton 1998) and numerous articles. He is currently working on a book, *Subjectivity and Understanding*, under contract with Oxford University Press, in which he defends the value of critical first-person reflection and uses it to clarify a conception of consciousness that serves as the basis for his accounts of visual, cognitive, and affective experience. He applies these accounts in arguing for views about what warrants our self-attributions of experience, what sort of mind needs consciousness, and what role consciousness plays in well-being and in our worthiness of concern and respect.





**Yannik Steinebrunner** is a Master's student of philosophy and a student research assistant at Basel University, Switzerland. Since the beginning of his academic career, he has specialised in the philosophy and neuroscience of consciousness, with a particular focus on the metaphysics and epistemology of consciousness. His current research interests include the meta-problem approach to consciousness and how our intuited sense of acquaintance might be given a cognitive explanation. In his master's thesis, he suggests a method for investigating intuitions about consciousness and argues that its application reveals acquaintance as the main driving force for our sense of the hard problem. His thesis is co-advised by François Kammerer.



**Terje Sparby** is currently Professor of Philosophy and Research Director at Steiner University College in Oslo. His areas of research include German idealism, meditation, and first-person methods. He studied philosophy at the University of Oslo and received his PhD in philosophy at Heidelberg University in 2012. The topic was Hegel's conception of the determinate negation. Terje has since been a postdoc at the Humboldt University and the Bender Institute of Neuroimaging, and a visiting scholar at the Mind & Life Institute. He did his habilitation at the Witten/Herdecke University in Germany, before returning to Norway.



**Daniel Stil** is a doctoral student at the Philosophy Department of the University of Heidelberg. He completed a B.A. in Philosophy and History, as well as an M.A. in Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, with an ERASMUS+ year at Durham University, UK. He was General Secretary of Deutsche Gesellschaft für phänomenologische Forschung from 2021–2023 and is currently the Treasurer of Deutsche Gesellschaft für phänomenologische Anthropologie, Psychiatrie und Psychotherapie.

**Christian Tewes** studied philosophy, history and German language and literature at the University of Essen and analytical philosophy at St Andrews. After completing his doctorate at the University of Koblenz Landau on the topic of consciousness research, he worked at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena from 2007 to 2014. He then worked as project leader of a research group on the topic of “embodiment” at the University of Heidelberg. Since 2020, he is Professor of Philosophy in the Educational Context with a special focus on phenomenology and philosophy of mind at Alanus University in Mannheim.



**Daniel Vespermann** is PhD fellow in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg and research assistant at the section for “Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy” at the University Hospital Heidelberg and of the DFG-project “Dynamics of Oikeiosis. Familiarity and trust as basic elements of an intersubjective anthropology and their significance for psychopathology”. In his dissertation, he develops a phenomenological perspective on affective niche construction. His research centers on philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychiatry, non-ideal epistemology, and social philosophy, focusing on situated approaches to affectivity, memory, and attention, philosophical implications of social psychiatry, and the connection of spontaneous thought processes to the social environment. He has published on affective atmospheres, affective injustice, and sociopolitical topics from the perspective of phenomenological psychopathology.



**Johannes Wagemann** is Professor of Consciousness Research with focus on Pedagogical Anthropology at Alanus University, Campus Mannheim. After completing his dissertation on the mind-brain problem at the University of Witten-Herdecke, he further developed H. Witzgenmann's structure-phenomenological approach and made it compatible with empirical research. His studies on perception, thought, social cognition, and aesthetic production integrate first-person accounts and mixed methods into standard approaches of cognitive science and psychology. By discussing the implications of his empirical work on related philosophical debates, such as mental agency, embodiment, and transclassical logics, Wagemann aims to contribute to a holistic and development-oriented view of the human being.





**Ulrich Weger** is professor of psychology and co-founder of the Center of First-Person Science at Witten/Herdecke University. His focus is on introspection research with a particular focus on implementing systematic self-observation into the teaching curriculum; he is also part of the coordination team of anthroposophical studies at the university.



**Alexander Nicolai Wendt**, PhD (Psychology), PhD (Philosophy), is Postdoctoral Researcher of Psychology at the Sigmund Freud University Vienna, Austria, and the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Germany. His research is focused on the renewal of phenomenological psychology as well as the theory and history of psychology. Alexander Wendt is Executive Chairman of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Philosophie & Psychologie (Association of Philosophy and Psychology) which promotes the exchange of knowledge between these disciplines: [www.phi-psy.de](http://www.phi-psy.de).

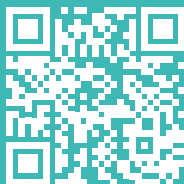
## Points of Interest

Mannheim is situated between two rivers, giving it plenty of waterside spots to catch the sunset. The Alanus Hochschule is situated near the quarter Neckarstadt, which boasts a lot of beer gardens, but also quirky cafes and cultural institutions. Here are some culinary recommendations in case you want to enjoy Mannheim on Friday evening!

Our nearest tram stop is Exerzierplatz, from where you can catch tram lines 5 and 15 towards the city center.

Within walking distance:

- **Inspire** Restaurant and beer garden (Ulmenweg 55, 68167 Mannheim) 10 minute walk from Alanus; sometimes has Salsa nights: [inspiredeutschland.com/event](http://inspiredeutschland.com/event)
- **Eichbaum Brauhaus** Restaurant and beer garden (Käfertaler Str. 168, 68167 Mannheim) 20 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 5 to Lange Rötterstraße
- **Café Pfau** Café with food, open late on Friday (Lange Rötterstraße 76, 68167 Mannheim) 20 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 5 to Lange Rötterstraße
- **Wirtshaus Uhland!** Traditional restaurant (Lange Rötterstraße 10, 68167 Mannheim) 30 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Alte Feuerwache
- **Alte Feuerwache** Cultural center and bar (Brückenstraße 2, 68167 Mannheim) 30 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Alte Feuerwache check out their events here: [altefeuerwache.com](http://altefeuerwache.com)
- **Eichbaum Malzwerk im Platzhaus** Beer garden (Am Meßpl. 7-8, 68169 Mannheim) 30 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Alte Feuerwache
- **Capitol** Cultural center and bar (Waldhofstraße 2, 68169 Mannheim) 35 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Alte Feuerwache check out their events here: [www.capitol-mannheim.de](http://www.capitol-mannheim.de)
- **Neckarstadt-West** studenty area with lots of bars along Mittelstraße, 68169 Mannheim Walk or take tram 15 to Alte Feuerwache, then head west along Mittelstraße from there A little further afield...
- **OEG City Beach** waterfront beergarden (Friedrichsring 48, 68161 Mannheim) 40 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Kurpfalzbrücke
- **Neckarstrand Mannheim** waterfront beergarden (Cahn-Garnier-Ufer, 68161 Mannheim) 40 minute walk from Alanus, or take tram 15 to Kurpfalzbrücke
- **Jungbusch** Mannheim's party quarter with plenty of bars to explore take tram 5 to Universitätsklinikum, then change to tram 2 to Dalbergstraße



**Titel Picture:**

Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann

**Contact:**

Prof. Dr. Johannes Wagemann

**Alanus Hochschule –**

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**For further information see:**

[fpsc-2025.institut-waldorf.de](https://fpsc-2025.institut-waldorf.de)