PhD student: Johannes Himmelreich

1. Can you summarize your research in three sentences?

I am interested in the concept of agency as it figures in the social sciences, ethics and political philosophy. The human individual is the paradigmatic agent, portrayed in works of culture and examined by the sciences. I argue that the conception should be expanded and that many other non-human entities such as groups, computer programs and robots are agents and can be held responsible for their actions.

2. Why is your research important? What does it change? What do you want it to change?

Understanding agency is important for questions about responsibility, rights and duties. For example, who is to be held responsible for things done by a machine? When could non-human agents become moral agents that have rights and duties? Consider a case from business ethics. If business activities harm individuals, to what extent and under what conditions can the corporation's employees be held responsible?

With that said, I am not under the illusion that philosophy always effects social change. One of philosophy's main contributions to society is rather to come up with answers preemptively, in case anybody asks the question. Then we will be able to say: "We thought about this! This is what we came up with."

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3. Who influenced you? Who do you dramatically disagree with?

I think my peers in the discipline exert the greatest influence on my work. I don't think I disagree with anybody personally since it's about arguments and not about who makes them.

4. Have you ever had an aha-moment that proved pivotal?

Unfortunately not. I suppose it's more common in philosophy to have wow- and yeah-moments when reading a good article or book.

5. What is the most important thing for a philosopher?

I have no settled views on this. At the moment I think it's important to read philosophy that is clear and from which you can learn a lot, whether it's in your own area or on some other question. Most issues in philosophy are intricately connected.