Serendipity

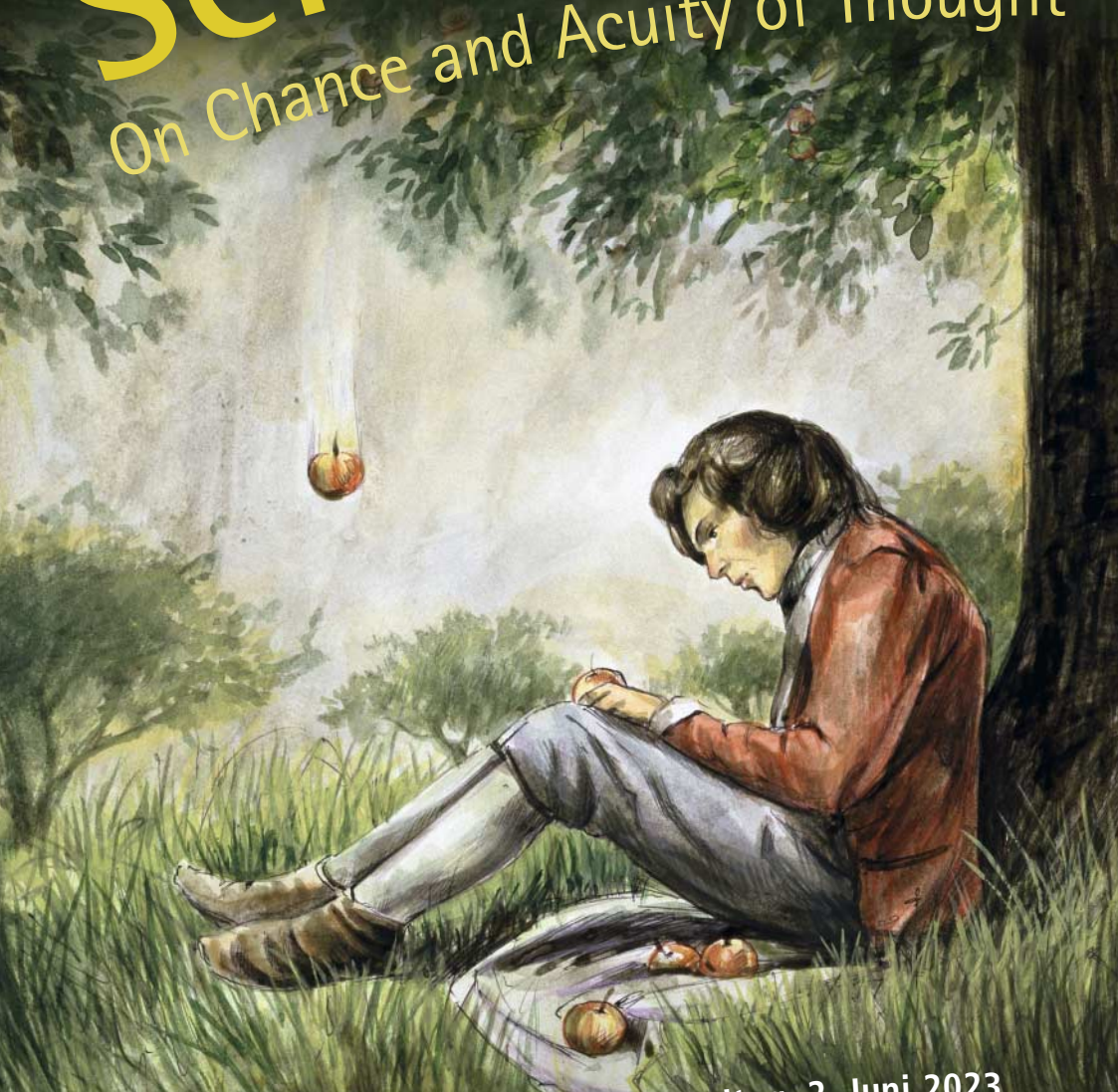## On Chance and Acuity of Thought

Donnerstag, 1. – Freitag, 2. Juni 2023

Workshop

EINSTEIN FORUM

Serendipity
On Chance and Acuity of Thought

[ˌsɛ.rɛn.ˈdɪp.ə.ti] commonly refers to an unplanned fortunate discovery or to *fi*nding something when looking for something else, thanks to an observant mind. But is serendipity something that *happens* to people, or is it rather something people *do*? In other words: Is serendipity a lucky accident or a developed skillset? Can we create conditions conducive to serendipitous moments to occur? And how does the digital environment impact the likelihood of chance finds?

Speakers and Themes

Samantha Copeland (Delft)

Seeing Serendipity: What is more important, a Prepared Mind or Cunning Wisdom?

Traditionally, "the prepared mind" (as Pasteur famously phrased it) has been credited with much of the success serendipity has brought in terms of scientific discoveries and innovation, for example. Recent work in serendipity science, however, suggests that recognizing the potential value in serendipitous events may be more about how we respond to our environment than about how we prepare for what we might encounter. In this talk I reflect on how these two sides can be seen as two sides of a coin, by exploring the role of epistemic emotions and individual experience on how and when potential value will be recognized, as well as by whom. That is, serendipity is not only available to geniuses or those fortunate enough to be the right person in the right place at the right time, it can be generated by unique interactions and the courage to contribute, by almost anyone, at any time.

Dr. Samantha Copeland is an assistant professor of philosophy in the Ethics and Philosophy of Technology Section at Delft University of Technology. As co-founder of the Serendipity Society she and her co-chairs have brought together a network of more than 150 people from around the world who are interested in the study of serendipity, both in theory and in practice, including artists, scientists, business developers and managers, innovators, archivists, academics, and more. She has co-edited two anthologies on recent work in serendipity, *The Art of Serendipity* (2022), and *Serendipity Science* (forthcoming 2023). Currently, she is working on the relationship between serendipity and ethics, both as a method for creating ethical insights but also in terms of the ethics of how we reward chance discovery and how it is or is not encouraged within research in different contexts.

Silvia Davoli (Oxford)

The Creation of the Word "Serendipity"

In 1842 one of the most important collections of the eighteenth century was sold at auction, that assembled by writer and collector Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, the eccentric Gothic Revival castle he built just outside London between 1751 and 1797. As Head Curator at Strawberry Hill, my main task in recent years has been to trace down the whereabouts of Walpole's lost treasures.

One of the objects that were most admired by Walpole–the portrait of Bianca Capello, Grand Duchess of Tuscany (1548-1587)–is of great relevance to this symposium. The invention of the word "serendipity" is in fact linked to this portrait, which to date has not been traced. In this presentation, I will discuss and analyse the events that led Walpole to the invention of the concept of serendipity.

Dr. Silvia Davoli, a specialist in the History of Collecting, is Head Curator at Strawberry Hill House and Garden, and author of the book *Lost Treasures of Strawberry Hill. Masterpieces from the Horace Walpole Collection* (2018). She is also an associate researcher at Oxford University.

https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/people/dr-silvia-davoli

Anabel Quan-Haase (London, Ontario)
Serendipity in the Humanities: The Changing Role of Digital and Physical Environments in Historical Research

The research process is in continual flux, even that of humanities scholars. The move toward broad digitization of materials has made many materials more accessible from more locations as well as connected various archives in new ways. Yet, historians often raise concern about what is gained and what is lost through digitization. One area that has sparked intense debate is the impact of digital environments on serendipity, a core experience in historical research. The present talk draws on a series of studies examining the changing nature of serendipity and examines existing similarities and differences between physical information environments like the library stacks and digital information environments like Twitter. How does the heavy reliance on digital sources affect serendipity and what opportunities exist for designing digital tools that support innovation, creativity, and resource discovery. While it is important to realize that the research process is a crooked path, it is also important to be aware of external constraints, including design features and affordances of digital environments, an increase in information sources, and time pressures. We argue that making serendipitous connections is a skill in which historians can be, and should be, trained in. We further argue that the role of physical and digital environments in serendipity is changing and future history pedagogies need to adapt.

Dr. Quan-Haase is a Full Professor of Sociology and Information and Media Studies and the Rogers Chair in Studies in Journalism and New Information Technology at Western University. She is the director of the SocioDigital Media Lab. Her work focuses on social change, social media, and social networks, with a keen interest in novel methodologies. She is the coeditor of *the Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (2022), coeditor of the *Handbook of Computational Social Science* (2022), coauthor of *Real-Life Sociology* (2020), and author of *Technology and Society* (2020). Dr. Quan-Haase has published over 100 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings. Dr. Quan-Haase has chaired the Communication, Information Technology, and Media Sociology section of the American Sociological Association and past president of the Canadian Association for Information Science. Through her policy work she has cooperated with the Benton Foundation, Partnership for Progress on the Digital Divide, Media Smarts, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and Canada's Digital Policy Forum. She is also a frequent expert commentator for *The Globe and Mail*, *CBC*, *Vice*, *The New York Times*, *CTV*, *Global News*, *Financial Post*, *The Huffington Post*, and many others.

Albrecht Schmidt (Munich)

The End of Serendipity: Will Artificial Intelligence Remove Chance and Choice in Everyday Life?

Software defines our everyday experiences. With an improved user experience, more and more people can use computer systems. Communication in families as well as in the workplace is largely software mediated. The choices we make, from the news articles we read to the movies we watch and the people we date, are to a large extent software supported. Personalized news portals, navigation systems, social media platforms, shopping portals, music streaming services, and dating apps are only some examples of systems that affect what we think and do. Artificial intelligence, learning about the users and their preferences, and striving for simplicity in interaction, reduces the need to make active decisions and hereby removes chance and choice. Will this lead to highly optimized systems – that apparently work great for the user – but at the same time end the element of randomness and serendipity in our lives? In the talk, I will analyze the situation and these developments, looking at contributing technologies such as content creating, recommender systems, and augmented reality. This opens the question if interactive human centered artificial intelligence can help to keep the user in control or if control is just an illusion.

Albrecht Schmidt is a professor of computer science at Munich University, where he holds a chair for Human-Centered Ubiquitous Media. His teaching and research interests are in human-centered artificial intelligence, intelligent interactive systems, ubiquitous computing, multimodal user interfaces, and digital media technologies. Prior to his current position, he was a professor at Stuttgart University, the University of Duisburg-Essen and he had a joint position between the Fraunhofer Institute for Intelligent Analysis and Information Systems (IAIS) and the University of Bonn. During his sabbatical in 2015 he was a visiting academic at the Engineering Department at the University of Cambridge in the UK and worked at Microsoft Research there. He studied computer science at the University of Ulm and at the Manchester Metropolitan University and in 2003 he completed his PhD on the topic of "Ubiquitous Computing - Computing in Context" at Lancaster University. Albrecht is co-chair of the ACM SIGCHI 2023 conference, he is on the editorial board of the ACM TOCHI journal, and he is the cofounder of the ACM conference TEI and Automotive User interfaces. In 2018, he was inducted into the ACM SIGCHI Academy and in 2020; he was elected to Leopoldina, the German academy of science.

Stephen Scholte (Brighton)
What is Serendipity in Psychopharmacology?

The history of psychopharmacological development is regularly described as having "relied on" serendipity for its progress. Here I will argue that despite the ubiquity of this claim, its substance is protean. The results of a systematic literature review of the theoretical work on serendipity, particularly as it relates to pharmaceuticals, constitute the first section of this presentation. The themes of expectation, and targets, which arise in this literature, I argue, are not clearly defined nor consistently employed. This is particularly relevant in the field of psychopharmacology in which links between physiological mechanisms and the diagnostic criteria based on symptomatology are poorly understood.

This leads to an alternative approach to understanding the term serendipity. In the second section, I present an empirical study of the use of the term serendipity, again focusing on psychopharmacology, and using literature from astronomy as a comparison point. Drawing on the work of Wittgenstein and Austin, and later Gieryn, I argue that the meaning of the term serendipity is not tied to a fixed construct (even within academia or the sciences), but rather is linked to different functions in different, specific contexts.

Stephen Scholte has recently completed a PhD at the Science Policy Research Unit of the University of Sussex, working with Ohid Yaqub and Paul Nightingale on the "Serendipity in Research and Innovation" project funded through the ERC. With a focus on serendipity in the field of psychopharmaceuticals, Steve's research uses mixed methods but is often focused on interrogating concepts and categorisations, and the effects of ambiguities therein. After studying a bachelor's in psychology, with minor studies in philosophy of science, Stephen Scholte went on to a master's degree in the history and theory of psychology, under Douwe Draaisma, at the University of Groningen.

Program

Thursday, June 1ˢᵗ, 2023

7pm
Silvia Davoli (Oxford)
The Creation of the Word "Serendipity"

Friday, June 2ⁿᵈ, 2023

10:30am
Martin Schaad (Potsdam)
Introduction

11:30am
Samantha Copeland (Delft)
Seeing Serendipity: What is more important, a Prepared Mind or Cunning Wisdom?

3pm
Stephen Scholte (Brighton)
What is Serendipity in Psychopharmacology?

4:30pm
Albrecht Schmidt (Munich)
The End of Serendipity: Will Artificial Intelligence Remove Chance and Choice in Everyday Life?

6pm
Anabel Quan-Haase (London, Ontario)
Serendipity in the Humanities: The Changing Role of Digital and Physical Environments in Historical Research