

Humboldt Kolleg

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### *Global Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

- 1) *Technological development and human health/ quality of life*
- 2) *Climate change and environmental sustainability*
- 3) *Democracy and cohesion in Europe*

### *Mental Health and the Idea of 'Progress': Some Problems from the Dialogue between Ancient and Modern Medicine*

It is still customary, outside the restricted circles of anthropologists and historians of medicine, to measure the credibility and value of ancient medical doctrines based on the principles and methodologies – real or supposed – of contemporary biomedicine, emphasizing its ‘absurdity’ or lack of effectiveness. If there are important objections against this approach in general, when mental health is at stake it is evident that the key questions discussed by the ancient have remained valid, and largely unresolved, throughout the history of psychiatry. In this paper I would like to present a few of the most important ones, in order to challenge the validity of any evolutionary narrative when we discuss approaches to mental health.

**Chiara Thumiger** is a classicist and historian of ancient science, currently holding a research Fellowship in the research Cluster ROOTS at the University of Kiel. On the medical side of her research, her interests lie in the area of history of psychiatry and of the representations of mental health. As a classicist, she has worked on Greek tragedy, ancient views about the self, and ancient animals. Recent publications are *A History of the Mind and Mental Health in Classical Greek Medical Thought* (Cambridge, 2017) and *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine* (co.-ed- w. P. Singer, Leiden, 2018). Among current projects there is a monograph about the ancient disease phrenitis and its afterlife in the Western medical tradition, and a volume on the topic of ‘holism’, ‘connectionism’ and ‘localisation’ in ancient medicine and its reception.