

Critical Antiquities Workshop

Semester 1 2021



CAN
CRITICAL ANTIQUITIES NETWORK

The seminars will be held online on Zoom.

Please note the seminars are on Fridays in Australia and Thursdays in the US.

Workshops

Matthew Sharpe | Deakin University
'Lucian (or Lycinus) on how (not) to choose (a) Philosophy'
Sydney: Friday 5 March 11am-12:30pm
New York: Thursday 4 March 7pm-8:30pm

Sara Brill | Fairfield University
'Aristotle, Biopolitics, and the *Iliad*'
Sydney: Friday 9 April 10am-11:30am
New York: Thursday 8 April 8pm-9:30pm

André Laks | Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City
'Actualizing Plato's Laws'
Sydney: Friday 7 May 11am-12:30pm
New York: Thursday 6 May 9pm-10:30pm

Brooke Holmes | Princeton University
'Canguilhem and the Greeks: Vitalism between History and Philosophy'
Sydney: 11 Friday June 11am-12:30pm
New York: Thursday 10 June 9pm-10:30pm

ALL WELCOME

For more information on the Critical Antiquities Network please email fass.can@sydney.edu.au

Event details can be found here:
[- **sophi-events.sydney.edu.au**](https://sophi-events.sydney.edu.au)

Image: *Fifty Days at Iliam: The Fire that Consumes All before It*, Cy Twombly, American (1928 - 2011)
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Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift (by exchange) of Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White, 1989, 1989-90-5

More information and to register

- **Abstracts**
Abstracts for the above papers can be found on the following pages.
- **Registration**
To register, please sign up for the [Critical Antiquities Network mailing list](#) and you will receive CAN announcements and Zoom links.

Lucian (or Lycinus) on how (not) to choose (a) Philosophy

Matthew Sharpe | Deakin University

Sydney: Friday 5 March 11am-12:30pm

New York: Thursday 4 March 7pm-8:30pm

Abstract: Lucian's *Hermotimus* has attracted comparatively little critical attention. Yet it is one of Lucian's longer texts, and of all of his texts, the closest in form to a Platonic, Socratic dialogue. *Hermotimus*, an aspiring Stoic, converses with the more sceptical Lycinus, who affects concern to understand how *Hermotimus* came to choose this philosophical way of life, and not others. Why did *Hermotimus* become a Stoic, rather than an Epicurean, or Platonist, etc.? If he knew enough to choose a philosophy wisely, wouldn't that only be possible if he were already wise? He would then not need a philosophy at all. But if he didn't know enough to be sure the Stoic path was the true way to wisdom, won't his decision to become a Stoic have been little more than a stab in the dark? Philosophy will hence not be meaningfully different from a religion or superstition. By posing this dilemma, I will contend, this artful dialogue asks questions which remain relevant for young students today, as they are confronted with competing philosophical and theoretical perspectives which bid for their allegiance. In this way, it echoes and aims to complement Plato's educational reflections, as certain signs in the text flag. The dialogue in addition poses dilemmas also for us as teachers, in differentiating between philosophical training and indoctrination to one or other sectarian perspective. If there is no good reason to become a Platonist rather than a Bourdieuan, a Camusian rather than a Agambenian, etc., or if any such reasons can only emerge having studied for many years in one perspective or another, aren't we forced to admit that the love of wisdom is groundless, founded on an arbitrary leap of faith, perhaps nudged along by charismatic teachers? I argue that at several moments, Lucian's dialogue suggests a different possibility, but one which turns upon a self-reflective turn from content to form: to learn to philosophise in a way which is distinguishable from what we would call 'blind faith' is to learn to be able to ask questions, and above all, to learn to question the epistemic bases of one's own beliefs, and even to be courageous enough to retract them in the face of rebuttal. But this is uncomfortable, unglamorous, and social factors also push against it. So, it is telling that *Hermotimus* ends the dialogue by wishing to leave philosophising behind altogether.

Aristotle, Biopolitics, and the *Iliad*

Sara Brill | Fairfield University

Sydney: Friday 9 April 10am-11:30am

New York: Thursday 8 April 8pm-9:30pm

Abstract: Aristotle's emphasis in *Politics* 7 on engineering the bodily as well as psychical character of citizens recommends comparison with contemporary theories of biopolitics, a comparison Mika Ojakangas has drawn with particular clarity (Ojakangas 2016). To be sure, Aristotle's eugenics legislation is designed to hold the generation of life under the harness of the political partnership. But it is far from clear that *bios* is the sole, or even main, target here and, as Brooke Holmes has pointed out (Holmes, 2019), we should guard against assuming too quickly the synonymy of the Greek *bios* and the prefix "bio-." When, in the central books of the *Politics*, Aristotle considers the various forms that collectives of humans may take, he does so precisely in order to observe the differences both between and within kinds, and the work these differences do in forming communities with very particular characters. Aristotle's emphasis on different kinds of human collectives connects his political theorizing with his zoological research, and with broader cultural tropes that treat vitality in close proximity to vividness. That is to say, while the specific legislation Aristotle designs invites comparison with biopolitical concerns, the end at which this legislation aims is determined within a conception of *zōē* whose political valence has not yet been fully charted.

This paper develops a genealogical lens for viewing Aristotle's thinking about the nature of the human multitude. The examples of political animals Aristotle offers in the *History of Animals*—bees, wasps, ants, and cranes (1.1.487b33)—figure prominently in the *Iliad*'s depictions of Achaean and Trojan forces, who are likened to swarms and flocks and herds of all kinds. When we examine the imagery Homer employs to depict the actions of the collective Achaean and Trojan forces, we encounter an iconography of shared life that profoundly shaped how Aristotle thinks about the work of the *polis*. My primary claim is that Aristotle's sense of the sharing of the perception of justice as the common deed that comprises human political life is informed by an Iliadic model, the harnessing of *aisthēsis* and logos alike for the pursuit of a common task. And, as with Aristotle, the root of this model is found in the very conception of living as it is accomplished by a variety of animal kinds. In both cases, living emerges as a collectively pursued enterprise requiring fluid combinations of coalescences and diffusions of force and capacity, a variety of "organizations" in a very particular sense. Prior to the reduction of people to things so powerfully observed by Simone Weil, armies have become packs and swarms, heroes have become walls and rivers, peoples have become sand and stars. I aim, then, to trace the model of political power—as the power to generate what Homer calls the "boundless people [*dēmos apeirōn*]" (24.776)—that emerges from out of the animal imagery for human collective action employed throughout the *Iliad*, in order to illuminate the conception of *zōē* that undergirds Aristotle's understanding of the formation of people and that complicates our assessment of the "biopolitical" character of Aristotle's thought.

Actualizing Plato's Laws

André Laks | Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City
Sydney: Friday 7 May 11 am-12:30pm
New York: Thursday 6 May 9pm-10:30pm

Abstract: Plato's last and longest dialogue is a fascinating, but little frequented work, even if progress has been made among specialists during the last 30 years or so. This is paradoxical. One cannot conceive of Aristotle Politics, of Polybius' analysis of the Roman constitution or of Cicero's pair *Republic/Laws* – not to speak about the Church Fathers and the Founding Fathers – without referring to Plato's *Laws*. For it is there that we find, for the first time, four basic concepts and principles systematically articulated in a cluster that proved to be of lasting political value: that all unaccountable power corrupts; that law should rule; that a 'mixed' constitution is the best that human beings can achieve; and that laws require a preamble. On the other hand, actual readers of the *Laws*, at least in the world most of us still live in, are not likely to feel much affinity with Plato's ultimate political proposals. There is little doubt that Plato's "second city" accentuates rather than alleviates the most unpleasant tendencies of the *Republic*, and that it shows a great number of traits that are, at best, questionable, and at worst – using an anachronistic word that is now at home in the political vocabulary – 'totalitarian'. The question I want to discuss in my talk is how to think about the relationship between importance, influence and distancing in the case of a work that represents a fundamental benchmark in the history of political thought. But the question is of a more general nature, too.

Canguilhem and the Greeks: Vitalism between History and Philosophy

Brooke Holmes | Princeton University

Sydney: 11 Friday June 11 am-12:30pm

New York: Thursday 10 June 9pm-10:30pm

Abstract: In this talk, I examine the role of ancient Greek medicine and philosophy in Georges Canguilhem's analysis of vitalism at the intersection of history and philosophy in his essay "Aspects of Vitalism" (1946) in light of larger questions about the historicity of "life" as a concept in the history and philosophy of science and contemporary biopolitical theory. Vitalism, for Canguilhem, is not a proper object of the history of science. But nor is it a philosophy that exists outside of historical time. I show how Canguilhem embeds vitalism both historically and trans-historically by threading each of its three "aspects" in the essay through ancient Greece. Canguilhem distinguishes his own understanding of both life and vitalism from that of the "classical" vitalists of the eighteenth century by refusing to read ancient Greece as romantically naïve or pre-technological. He instead locates a dialectic between vitalism and mechanism already in antiquity. I argue for a critical re-reading of Canguilhem's own conjunction of vitalism and Hellenism that resists its figuration of ancient Greece as the place where the human qua species first comes to take itself as an object of knowledge. I instead propose reading ancient Greek medical and philosophical texts that are read and reread in debates about the nature of human life and the life of Nature over millennia as part of a milieu that shapes how contemporary thinkers theorize life in the interest of human flourishing.