Alteration of consciousness in Ancient Greece: divine *mania*

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Abstract
Ancient Greece was unique in its attitude to alteration of consciousness. Various altered states of consciousness were commonly known: initiates experienced them during mystery rites; sacred officials and enquirers attained them in the major oracular centres; possession by various deities was recognized; and some sages and philosophers practised manipulation of consciousness. From the perspective of individual and public freedom, the prominent position of *mania* in Greek society reflects its openness and acceptance of the inborn human proclivity to experience alterations of consciousness, which were interpreted in positive terms as god-sent. These mental states were treated with cautious respect, but never suppressed or pushed to the cultural and social periphery, in contrast to many other complex societies, ancient and modern.

Keywords
Alteration of consciousness, ecstatic experience, madness, *mania*, possession

Introduction

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that *mania*[1] is not always an evil, because 'in reality, the greatest of blessings come to us through mania, when it is sent as a gift of the gods' (Plato *Phaedrus* 244A). This statement is followed by a discourse on differed kinds of mania: prophetic, initiatory, poetic and erotic. Did Socrates mean that madness could be positive? This paper summarizes the results of my recently published study (Ustinova, 2018), where I contend that Plato's passage reflects the perception of the actual world by ancient Greeks, and explore the varieties of divine mania. I seek to demonstrate that in ancient Greece people from different walks of life thought, or felt intuitively, and most importantly, acted in accordance with the belief that certain abnormal mental states were beneficial to the person who experiences them, and to his or her community. They also knew that mania was not static, but multifarious and multi-levelled. Notwithstanding the awareness that attaining the state of mania might be difficult and dangerous, many Greeks valued it and sought to experience it in various contexts.

In modern research, the predominant opinion is that human societies are divided into two groups regarding their attitude towards manipulation of consciousness. 'Polyphasic' cultures value altered states of consciousness experienced principally in ritual contexts; they are for the most part pre-industrial. 'Monophasic', mainly post-industrial, cultures marginalize these experiences as unorthodox or even criminalize them, and alteration of consciousness in such societies is limited to the secular sphere (Laughlin, McManus and D'Aquili, 1992). It is also argued that, with increasing inequality, altered states become a domain of particular practitioners, who were gender- or otherwise specialized; in highly stratified societies, cults focused on such states are expected to play peripheral role (Whitehead, 2011: 190–1).

[1] The meaning of the Greek word *mania* is different from the conventional understanding of the word 'mania' in modern English, and it is italicized here in order to emphasize that it is a transliteration of the Greek term μανία. The word is used in this sense throughout this article, although hereafter in roman type to avoid much italicization.

Furthermore, social complexity is considered to bring about an emphasis on mediumistic activities, at the expense of other types of alteration of consciousness (Cohen, 2007: 87).

However, abundant written and archaeological evidence suggests that, in the complex and highly stratified world of Greek city-states, various forms of alteration of consciousness were highly valued. In contrast, in the broadly contemporaneous Roman republic, ecstatic behaviour was considered repulsive, as testified by numerous sources, most conspicuously Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 2. 19. 2–3) and Cicero (*Laws* 2. 37). The most salient corollary of the chasm between the Greek and Roman attitudes to ecstatic cults is that the divide between acceptance and rejection of alteration of consciousness is defined not only by high-order sociological criteria, such as social stratification or the degree of industrialization, but is rooted in much subtler differences between societies.

The notion of deviant behaviour is a social convention, and in mental disorders social factors acquire paramount significance (Helman, 1990: 214–66; Romanucci-Ross and Tancredi, 1991), but non-pathological alterations of consciousness, that are very often associated with religious beliefs and practices, are even more emphatically culture-dependent. Thus, sweeping generalizations about mental disorders and alteration of consciousness are anachronistic and therefore distorted. Obviously, nowadays no less than in antiquity, individuals and groups of people differ in their views on such issues as behavioural norms and abnormality, as well as manipulation and alteration of consciousness. Furthermore, these views evolve. During the last 50 years, more and more people – members of the general public as well as academic and medical establishment – have ceased to regard alteration of consciousness exclusively as either a pathology or part of primitive rites, and engage with them personally (by means of meditation, psychedelic drugs or hypnosis) and learn about them (Beischel, Rock and Krippner, 2011). Awareness of the rich variety of phenomena involving alteration of consciousness in some earlier cultures, particularly in ancient Greece, is important for a better understanding of the interaction between the individual's aspirations and social norms in later societies, including our own.

Ancient terms

The Greek word 'mania' refers to a range of multifarious conditions, which cannot be concisely described by the words 'madness' or 'frenzy' used in modern English translations. As Plato's quotation (above) demonstrates, mania also implies divine inspiration or revelation. Any deviation from an ordinary baseline state of consciousness could be called mania, whether achieved voluntarily or involuntarily, deliberately sought or resulting from a disease, seen as a god-sent blessing or a curse. This variety of meanings reflects a wide range of experiences, from ecstatic prophesying to violent frenzy.

Several other terms also denoted abnormal mental states explicitly attributed to divine intervention. A mortal could be possessed by a god (*theoleptos* or *katochos*), and his state would be described as possession, *katoche.* Apparently, these words implied the sensation of outside control, being taken or held by an external power. One could also have the god inside, literally 'be engodded' (*entheos*); in this case, the superhuman compulsion was supposedly felt as an invasive power within one's body or mind.[2] Every god could enthuse a mortal with *enthousiasmos*, 'engoddedness', or *epipnoia*, 'inspiration'. The ambiguity of the word *entheos* is similar to that of mania: on the one hand, Plato's poets, seers and true lovers are 'engodded', and this state is regarded as a blessing, but on the other hand, Euripides' agonized Phaedra looks like *entheos*, invaded by malicious gods (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244B; *Ion* 534B; *Symposium* 179A; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 141–4, 241–8). In Greek discourse on mania and *enthousiasmos*,

[2] 'Engodded' is the word invented by Hoffman, 1997: 30. This state is called '*endieué*' by Rouget, 1990: 346. For the term *entheos*, see also Briand, 2003.

danger and achievement, superhuman and deranged, were often intertwined. These two phenomena looked quite similar to an outside observer (Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease* 4; Xenophon, *Symposium* 1. 9. 10).

Nevertheless, these manifestations were often regarded as god-given gifts. Even today, alterations of consciousness sought by individuals and various cult groups are not always easy to discern from symptoms of psychiatric disorders. For instance, the difference between depersonalization and false memories as symptoms of dissociation identity disorder, and the detachment from the body and modified awareness of the past in spiritual seekers and sect members is far from self-evident (Luhrmann, 2005: 135–6). In antiquity, the spectrum between derangement and divine inspiration was perceived as a continuum, and the ambiguity of mania, even when god-given, is one of the main themes explored in my book (Ustinova, 2018).

Modern notions and models

Waking consciousness, considered the only one normal by most modern Westerners, is merely one state of consciousness inside a much broader range, a 'continuum of consciousness' (Bitbol, 2015: 107; Farthing, 1992: 170–200). Characteristically, states other than the waking consciousness are called 'altered states of consciousness'.[3] All these states share a common characteristic: when in an altered state of consciousness, the individual perceives his or her inside and outside world in a manner different from the usual, and consciousness produces misrepresentations, such as hallucinations, delusions, and distortions of memory, body-image and time (Revonsuo, Kallio and Sikka, 2009). When sufficiently profound, these changes silence the waking consciousness and free the mind from the limitations of the alert ego, allowing self-transcendence and an awareness undisturbed by the external world (Winkelman, 2000: 113–24). For an observer, the behaviour of a person in an altered state of consciousness looks very much like dissociation, including such characteristics as depersonalization, derealization, identity alteration and amnesia (Geertz, 2004: 368–9). Pathological and non-pathological conditions involving alteration of consciousness also share another important common characteristic, namely disruption in the relationship between the individual's consciousness and the world, which results in an altered representation of the surrounding context (Revonsuo et al., 2009: 194–8).

Altered states of consciousness are cross-cultural. A survey of approximately 500 traditional societies around the globe, conducted by E. Bourguignon, demonstrates the presence of culturally patterned institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness in 90% of the societies sampled (Bourguignon, 1968, 1973; Holm, 1982; Lewis, 1989). The ability to experience alterations of consciousness is, so it seems, a part of human biological potential.

Overall, mental states of humans can be manipulated by similar methods cross-culturally, notwithstanding differences between societies. These methods are broadly divided into two groups: those based on excessive stimulation, and those based on the opposite, that is, sensory deprivation. They include extensive motor behaviour, auditory driving, activation of endogenous euphoriant releases, ingestion of psychotropic substances, meditation, and hypnotic suggestion (Geertz, 2004; Pearson, 2002: 74; Winkelman, 2000: 148–52). Techniques of consciousness alteration can be learnt, and although their effect is greatly enhanced by a belief in the reality of supernatural agents that the experiencer seeks to approach, even total non-believers can have visions of such entities if they follow the traditional procedure (Andersen et al., 2014: 222; Luhrmann, 2005: 140). Whatever particular technique is used, the emphasis on absorption training, such as meditation, isolation, visualization, etc., is common to various traditions of vision quest (Luhrmann, 2005: 144).

[3] For a recent multidisciplinary assessment of the phenomenon, see Cardeña and Winkelman, 2011. On the features of altered states of consciousness, see Kihlstrom, 1994.

The cross-cultural nature of alteration of consciousness presents a fascinating challenge to a historian: if experiencing these states is part of being human, the variety of cultural phenomena involving these states ensues from culture-specific conditions, exactly like gender norms versus sex, and feasting arrangements versus nutrition. The function and status of alteration of consciousness in a given society are indicative of its important characteristics (Lambek, 1989: 46). Exploring the role of alteration of consciousness in ancient Greece is especially interesting because of its exceptional role in this culture, and its prominence in European history.

The ubiquity of this phenomenon allows a cautious application of evidence on the manipulation of consciousness in other cultures, ancient and modern, to the research of Greek civilization. The potential of using the results of cognitive studies and neuroscience cannot be overestimated: existing testimony on Greek religion and culture contain very limited direct evidence on the mental experiences of those involved in various cultic activities, and these accounts cannot be explained solely inside their cultural context. What is called for in order to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of people of the past is the application of facts and explanatory models based on the study of people of the present, provided by modern science.

Until half a century ago, the age-old question had been 'Why do people hallucinate?' This question implies that the normal state is the baseline waking state, and it has to be manipulated in some way in order to be modified and allow hallucinations to occur. In the 1960s, the Polish neuropsychologist Jerzy Konorski (1967: 174–81) was the first to ask the opposite question, 'Why do people not hallucinate constantly?' He demonstrated that the connections between our brain and the sense organs work in both directions. Under normal circumstances, 'retro' connections from the brain to the sense organs, which produce hallucinations, are supressed, but when for whatever reason the sensory input is crucially limited, the backflow from the cortex to the periphery produces hallucinations which are subjectively impossible to differentiate from the perceived world. This insight, revolutionary half a century ago, has been abundantly corroborated by the neurological research and at present is considered fundamental (Corlett et al., 2019; Sacks, 2007: 77–8). It is of critical importance for my study, because it explains, economically and elegantly, several basic characteristics of the altered states of consciousness: the wide range of the experiences ensuing from a wide range of conditions, and the reality of images and sensations from the viewpoint of the experiencing person.

Although my research is based on the assumption that people are biological and cultural creatures at the same time (Romanucci-Ross, Moerman and Tancredi, 1991: x–xii), my approach is largely phenomenological: I try to understand how multifarious phenomena stemming from alteration of consciousness were felt and perceived by the people who experienced them and their communities and in what way they interacted with the Greek culture.[4]

Prophetic mania

In Socrates' list of the blessings of madness, prophetic mania holds a place of honour: madness of prophetic priestesses is mentioned first, discussed at length and praised as the noblest of arts (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244AD). In his opinion, god-induced prophecy is a quintessential expression of divine mania, the greatest gift of the immortals to mortals.[5] Prophetic mania is defined as *epipnoia*, inspiration, granted by Apollo (Plato, *Phaedrus* 265B; cf. *Laws* 738C). In practice, although Apollo was the oracular god par excellence, other deities could also encourage

[4] For this approach, see Bitbol, 2015: 104.

[5] On Greek oracular practices, see: Flower, 2008; Georgoudi, 2012; Johnston, 2008; Rosenberger, 2001; Stoneman, 2011.

prophecy-giving. To gain inspiration, the seer (*mantis*) or prophet (*prophetes*) had to become *entheos* or *katochos*, inspired or seized by a god: they served as mediums, conveying superhuman knowledge by means of their bodies.[6] When in the grip of the god, the medium could display a wide range of abnormal behaviour, from mere detachment to violent paroxysms. These mental states, which today would be referred to as 'altered states of consciousness', were *enthousiasmos* ('engoddedness') or mania for the Greeks.

Among dozens of sanctuaries focused on prophecy-giving by an appointed sacred official, the most famous were Delphi in Balkan Greece, and Didyma and Claros in Asia Minor. In order to change his or her state of consciousness and become *entheos*, the prophetic person needed a set of ritual actions. A common prerequisite was a solitary and ritually pure way of life in general, in addition to isolation for a fast, ceremonies of purification, entering a special environment, and exposure to various substances,[7] which served as driving factors and immediately preceded oracle-giving. An ecstatic diviner felt controlled or possessed by an outside power and in many cases was oblivious of his or her behaviour and speech during a prophetic séance. Those observing this individual could clearly see that only the outer shell remained the same, while other elements of the personality, such as the contents of speech, even the voice and facial expression, changed dramatically. Encounters with these phenomena were overwhelming and produced a numinous sensation of divine presence, both in the prophetic individual and in his or her community.

Alongside oracular centres focused on professional mediumship, sanctuaries where lay people received prophetic responses thrived due to the fact that they provided conditions for personal direct contact between the enquirer and the deity, by means of inducing visions and apparitions. Ordinary people could attain visions interpreted as instructions from the gods either during encounters with divine beings in their established sanctuaries, or in other locations, mostly in places considered numinous, such as caves and thick forests (Ustinova, 2009: 68). The most striking and well-documented example is the oracle of Trophonius in Lebadeia (near Thebes).[8] To achieve an altered state of consciousness, the suppliant there underwent a series of complex preparations and was left alone in an awe-inspiring underground grotto, isolated from the world and its distractions. Laymen – at least some of them – could achieve one or more episodes of prophetic mania, which were significant enough to be commemorated in inscriptions, and discussed by later writers with no less awe than utterings of prophetic priests.

The mere fact of ecstatic prophecy-giving was not guaranteed, and the result of the endeavour was open-ended. Obtaining a response from a prophetic sanctuary was a troublesome and costly enterprise, yet there was a clear tendency to seek predictions at prominent centres of ecstatic prophecy, whenever important issues had to be resolved. However, messages obtained by this method were treasured, since the prophetic individual was regarded as a mere instrument of the gods, their mouthpiece communicating divine wisdom to the mortals. Since Greek cities and individuals sought oracles in order to 'obtain certainty in an uncertain world' (Bowden, 2013: 46; see also Eidinow, 2007: 10–25), due to the belief in its divine source, prophecy was a forceful factor in the social life of individuals and communities: divine inspiration was passed over to the community, and an inspired prophet was a provider of assurance and self-confidence.

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[6] On cult officials in oracular shrines, see Georgoudi, 1998.

[7] Not necessarily psychotropic substances; often drinking water could trigger prophecy-giving, but in Delphi intoxicating gases probably influenced the consciousness of the highly hypnotizable prophetic priestess; Ustinova, 2009: 81–155.

[8] The most systematic and thorough research on Trophonius is by Bonnechere, 2003.

Initiatory mania

Mysteries or mystery initiations were secret cults intended to bestow happiness in this world and often a better life in the hereafter on their adherents, usually called *mustai*. 'Mystery initiations' is a common rendering of the Greek word *telete* (rite of fulfilment). Various mystery initiations were very popular, and the most prominent among them were the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter celebrated near Athens, the mysteries of the Cabiri conducted on the island of Samothrace, and the Bacchic-Orphic mysteries, which could be performed everywhere. There is no uniformity in the organization of mystery cults: several among them allowed very vast membership, and many dispensed with a permanent organization.[9]

The Eleusinian and the Bacchic-Orphic mysteries promised the initiates a blissful existence in the present and the future, particularly after death. Other *teletai,* notably the Corybantic rites, did not deal with salvation after the death, but reformed the earthly lives of the adherents. While mystery initiations focused on different gods, and seem to have had different aims, they still had some basic characteristics in common. In the course of the central ceremony of initiation into a mystery cult, a great secret was imparted to the *mustai.* All the details of the eye-opening, life-changing disclosure of the ultimate secret were ineffable, but it is known that the initiates witnessed certain objects and heard certain utterings. These objects, words and actions do not seem to have contained any life-changing revelation that could potentially provide participants in the ceremonies with a release from earthly evils.

The Corybantic initiations, offer a conspicuous example of the rites focused on an ecstatic state as their primary goal (Ustinova, 1992–98). Corybantism was, *inter alia*, a technique of healing mental disorders.[10] While their power to inflict mental disorders was shared with other deities and demons, the Corybantes were believed to possess this gift *par excellence*. Both healers and madmen, men and women alike, participated in the rites. The common manifestation of Corybantism was ecstatic dancing in the state of collective violent frenzy. Corybantic treatment of mental disorders was based on the idea that madness may be cured by means of madness: a cathartic paroxysm could release a person from possession by a daemon or a divinity. Other participants, once initiated in the same way, also returned to the normal tranquil state – until the next gathering.

Anthropological studies of possession-trance behaviour suggest a plausible model for understanding the Corybantic rites. People cured by means of a Corybantic initiation needed to participate repeatedly in high arousal rites, as a means of maintaining their mental health. The majority of participants, however, did not suffer from a particular mental ailment, and simply enjoyed the excitement caused by the ritual tunes. Aristotle (*Politics* 1342a10) mentions 'enthusiastic excitement' caused by ecstatic ritual tunes, which brings about cure and purification (*katharsis*), as well as feelings of relief and delight.

Another category of mystery rites (such as the Eleusinian mysteries and the Bacchic-Orphic initiations) aimed at an even more profound experience. Cicero (*Laws* 2. 36) affirms that in Eleusis the initiates 'get the idea not only of how to live in joy, but also how to die with hope for the best'. The idea that those who arrive in Hades uninitiated would wallow in the mud, while those initiated would dwell with the gods, was reiterated on multiple occasions (*The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 480–2; Plato, *Phaedo* 69C; Isocrates 4. 28). The destiny of the initiates underwent so dramatic a transformation that it could be perceived as an apotheosis: 'Once human, you have become a god,' is the inscription on a gold tablet which accompanied a *mustes* to the grave (Graf and Johnston, 2007: Nos. 3, 5). Thus, most mysteries transformed the initiate's personality through changing his or her attitude to life, and the Eleusinian and Bacchic-Orphic rites delivered much more, altering their feelings about death.

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[9] On Greek mystery cults, see: Bowden, 2010; Bremmer, 2014; Burkert, 1987; Scarpi, 2002.

[10] For an analysis of clinical and therapeutic data, see Jeanmaire, 1970: 105–8.

The impact of *teletai* on the participants appears to have been very different from an array of myths or prescriptions: instead, the extant sources suggest the attainment of an awareness of a sort. Aristotle is quoted to state that 'the participants of initiations into mysteries do not have to learn anything, but rather to experience and to be inclined, that is to say, to become fit (for the purpose)' (Rose, 1886: fragment 15). In his view, the most important objective of the Greek initiations is to ensure that the *mustai* undergo a certain generic experience. The focus of these mysteries was revelation of the hidden truth, *epopteia*, 'beholding', a direct encounter with the divinely imparted exclusive knowledge, which elevated the initiate to a new blessed state. The divinely given effect was 'knowing beyond knowledge',[11] wordless comprehension which promised salvation and had to be remembered forever. This experience is repeatedly described as ultimate joy, harmony and bliss.

Plutarch has left a fascinating account of a mystery experience, depicting a long movement through the darkness, with a marvellous light at the end, visions, happiness and meetings with kindly people, as well as the soul's reunification with the body, which implies that they were conceived as temporarily separated during the experience (Sandbach, 1969: fragment 178). In modern terms, alteration of consciousness experienced by the initiate during the ceremony (and congruent with other, less detailed references to mystery experiences) induced the feeling of rejuvenation and transformed his personality through changing his attitude to life and death. Thanks to initiation rites that brought them as close to death as was permissible to mortals, *mustai* were less fearful of the inescapable end of their life. They were confident of their renewal and rebirth as immortals, because mystic death was followed by rebirth. Thus, mystic initiation may be defined as ersatz-death, *imitatio mortis* (Bernabé, 2016: 28). In real life, today and 2000 years ago, some people approach death very closely as a result of an illness, wound or accident, and describe their 'brush with death' as a complex event, called a near-death experience.[12] If one had tried to construct a description of an experience as close to near-death experience as possible, it is hard to imagine a more apt and vivid report than Plutarch's fragment (which immediately follows his observations on the proximity of mystery experience to death).

I suggest that the lore of near-death experiences, combined with the universal human propensity to manipulate consciousness, and the tradition of tribal initiations, could influence the evolution of mystery initiations. Plato's and Plutarch's juxtaposition of mystic experiences and death discloses, perhaps, their intuition that the two sensations are cognate. Throughout the history of the mystery rites, individual predisposition and environment defined the profundity of one's experience, and many initiates attended the ceremonies for the sake of the tradition, while others experienced various degrees of altered states of consciousness, and the lucky few could even attain the supreme bliss of feeling at one with the deity they worshipped.

Bacchic ecstasy

Dionysus is described as 'mad' (*mainomenos*), the word indicating either the ability of the god to make others mad, or his own madness.[13] The mad god's other name was *Bacchios*, and his worshippers, calling themselves *bakchoi* and *bakchai*, identified with him, assuming for some time his wild behaviour. Men were not absolutely excluded from ecstatic Dionysiac rites, as attested in historical sources, but the mythological semi-bestial males of Dionysus' retinue, on

[11] Wulff (2000: 398), citing the words of a modern spiritual seeker.

[12] For a recent overview, see Holden, Greyson and James, 2009. For near-death experiences in the Classical world: Plato, *Republic* 614A–621D; Plutarch, *Moralia* 563B–568A.

[13] Homer, *Iliad* 6. 132. On ecstatic cults of Dionysus, see: Seaford, 2006; Villanueva Puig, 2009.

the one hand, and the effeminate mad Dionysus clad in women's clothes,[14] on the other hand, were both contradictory to the Greek ideal of the clear-headed warlike male. This visualization of Dionysus and his entourage appears to reflect the deep suspicion held by Greek males towards the god of ecstasy, and the association of this state predominantly – although not exclusively – with women.[15]

In myth, Dionysus' favourite way of penalizing mortals was by striking with insanity whole communities, groups of people, or individuals. Frenzy of those who willingly bowed to his power was usually beneficial and could bring about much happiness, but ecstasy enthused by the god was still called and perceived as mania. Female followers of Dionysus, in myth and in real life, were often dubbed maenads, *mainades*, literally 'mad' or 'frenzied women', the word deriving from the same root as the noun 'mania' and the verb '*mainomai*', 'to rage, be mad'.

Even if not murderous for those who joyfully surrender to the god, in myth and drama Bacchic mania is disturbing and menacing. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, its destructive force is tremendous: killing the king Pentheus was only the zenith of a wild hunt leading to *omophagia*, 'the joy of eating raw meat' (*Bacchae* 138).[16] Normal social order is inverted in many ways, and gender conventions are reversed. In the *Bacchae*, women rush out of their homes, roaming and dancing freely in the mountains, hunting like men and tearing apart wild beasts instead of sacrificing domestic animals in a proper ceremony. At the same time, males – and Dionysus among them – wear female clothes, and men are defeated by women in battle, thus making the reversal of normality bi-directional. Transvestism could also advance the process of abandoning one's own personality and becoming *entheos.*

Having Bacchus inside themselves and feeling temporarily like a god rather than mortal was madness and bliss, a state both frightening and exciting. This is not a mere poetic image: Bacchic possession, including mountain-roaming and raw-eating, is attested to, not only in myth and art but also in historical and epigraphic testimonies, originating from different parts of the Greek world.[17] A substantial number of citizen women, and sometimes even men, participated in Bacchic rites.

Gender imbalance, characteristic of the Bacchic rites, probably reflects the proclivity of women in patriarchal societies to channel their suppressed psychological tension by means of high arousal rituals. Modern anthropological and historical evidence from Morocco, northern Greece and Italy demonstrates that in several communities around the Mediterranean, women participated or still participate in ecstatic rites involving eating raw meat and mountain-roaming (Jeanmaire, 1970: 128–31; Rouget, 1990: 296–308; Xygalatas, 2014). The effect of participation in the ecstatic rites is beneficial: after the fierce outburst and period of consciousness alteration, the devotees return to their routine refreshed. By channelling strain, especially prominent in subdued women in patriarchal societies, collective ecstasy resolves psychological tension and brings about feelings of peace and satisfaction. In Greece, the complex of recurrent fits of compulsive dancing in the wilderness appears to have been considered as periodic visitations by Dionysus, the god who makes his presence evident through possession. Finally, ritual reversal affirms the norm: the inverted gender roles of the bacchants emphasize the perpetuity of traditional gender roles in the male-dominated society.

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[14] For Dionysus represented on Attic vases as ecstatic or mad, with foreign attributes, see Carpenter, 1997: 37–8. For the god's effeminacy and transvestism, see: Bremmer, 1999; Buxton, 2013: 229–32.

[15] For Dionysus as a paradox and Dionysiac ambiguities, see Versnel, 1990: 96–205.

[16] For a commentary to this tragedy, see: Dodds, 1944; Seaford, 1996.

[17] E.g. Diodorus of Sicily 4. 3. 2-3; Plutarch, *Moralia* 249E; Pausanias, 10. 6. 4; 10. 32. 7; Strabo, 10. 3. 23. For inscriptions, see : Jaccottet, 2003: 2: Nos 146, 149, 150.

Thus, temporary mania served to sustain normal restrained behaviour, of women in particular, and was therefore not only tolerated, but even encouraged by the communities: women safely remained 'the second sex'.

Bacchic possession involves enormous physical efforts, which could be conceived as superhuman, but are actually attested in humans in altered states of consciousness. Exhaustion from excessive movement is one of the methods of manipulation of consciousness. When coupled with hunger and dehydration, exertion could easily bring about alteration of consciousness, including audial and visual hallucinations, abnormal physical resilience, etc. Simultaneous crying and the use of 'mind-altering' musical instruments, such as the tambourine and pipes, could bring about ecstatic states (Menier, 2001). Another important factor is the human ability to imitate the behaviour of others unintentionally, often not even being aware of this simulation. In a state of intense arousal, when control and inhibition are low, the bacchant's consciousness merged with that of the group: this is the transformation that Euripides called *thiaseuein psuchan*, 'to congregationalize one's soul' (Euripides, *Bacchae* 70–2, translation by Dodds 1944: 75).

Alteration of consciousness of the participants in the Bacchic rites was expressed in a number of symptoms. The factors just mentioned triggered endorphin release, which could cause the feeling of happiness and induced hallucinations. The bacchants are time and again described as blessed and joyful. Their happiness results from abandonment of their normal identity, meaning liberation from social demands, memories and troubles, as well as a suspension of intelligent control. Alteration of consciousness allows an acute sensation of timelessness, a minute of joy that is eternal. These are perhaps the reasons for worshipping Dionysus as the Liberator, *Lusios*, and especially for the feeling of heavenly bliss experienced by the bacchants.

The clue to Bacchic mania is in the realization that the destructive and beneficial effects of ecstatic possession intermingle, and in antiquity this was intuitively grasped, reflected in myth and presented on the stage by Euripides in the *Bacchae*. Ambiguity is the essence of Bacchic mania: being not like regular humans is becoming either divine or bestial or both at the same time. This state is risky and exhilarating, liberation is frightening and joyful: the opposites are always linked together. To those who were pure – that is, who eagerly accepted the god and his rites and let the ecstatic current carry them – Bacchic possession brought happiness; to those who impiously resisted the god, his rites were fatal.

Combat fury and battlefield apparitions

Warriors' mania, expressed in intrepid courage and a blatant disregard of pain, as well as bestial cruelty to the enemy, was known in Archaic Greece, valued as a praised social asset, and feared because of its destructive force. This berserk fury was called *lussa,* the word deriving from *lukos*, wolf, and was attributed to a goddess named Lyssa, portrayed as a hideous female, sometimes with canine heads emerging above her head. Unlimited fearlessness and a propensity to slaughter aroused awe, and had to be controlled. During the Classical period, rabid madness of individual soldiers gave way to extreme violence displayed by entire units, but the phenomenon of the raging warrior did not disappear (Compton, 2006; Dumézil, 1970).

The opposite of martial frenzy was dread, also experienced during combat. Usually, irrational terror was called *paneia*, panic, and belonged to the realm of Pan, whose expertise in mania matched that of Dionysus (Borgeaud, 1988). Combat-related long- and short-term psychological distress was quite common. Thus, martial mania, be it heroic fury or shameful fear, could persist after the battle and affect the life of the individual and his community.

Battlefield visions could also provide the soldiers with hope and a sense of support. Quite often they were attributed to Pan, the god of hallucinations. In contrast to other alterations of consciousness on the battlefield, epiphanies had never been considered as manifestations of

derangement, and were firmly believed and immortalized for the benefit of the generations to come (Herman, 2011; Wheeler, 2004).

Wolfish *lussa* and *paneia* were the two contrasting extremes of the warrior's behaviour on the battlefield. Both phenomena were instilled by gods with animal traits, regarded as mania, and could be experienced either individually or in groups. It is noteworthy that Lyssa and Pan were not foreign to the realm of Dionysus: aberration of perception and bestial or superhuman behaviour were considered cognate to *bakcheia*. The fascinating ambiguity of these gods, both mad and maddening, leads to the very core of the Greek concept of mania. Terrifying as it was, possession by Ares or Lyssa was advantageous in combat, and therefore highly valued.

Possession by the nymphs

Pan and the nymphs share the same wild environment, hence personify the idea of separation from civilization.[18] Withdrawal from the society results in hallucinations and visions that may propel people to prophesy and experience otherworldly happiness – or to terrify and drive them out of their wits. The sensation of being singled out by a nymph, probably with erotic undertones, could give rise to a compulsive drive to return to the place where the man had experienced the epiphany (most people seized by the Nymphs were men).

Alone in the wilderness or in a cave, which belong to the domain of Pan and the nymphs, and in an uninhabited terrifying environment, people easily hallucinated. In particular, rustles in the cave and the medley of noises in the wilderness provoked acoustic projection, shaping natural sounds into messages from the gods. In Greek terms, people are exposed to seizures by these deities, and become possessed. Being in the grip of the god was awesome and precarious. On the one hand, Pan might inflict destructive madness on individuals or whole armies, and the nymphs could put an end to the earthly life of the one they chose. On the other hand, possession by the nymphs or Pan might bring about divine mania, bestowing visions of epiphany, vatic abilities, poetic inclinations, or a sensation of extreme happiness. The experience can even be transformative, changing or profoundly influencing the person's way of life and perception of himself.

Poetic mania

Poetic mania is Socrates' third kind of divine madness. Poets and their audience believed that their inspiration was possession by the Muses, Apollo and other gods, and even if this viewpoint gradually became a literary convention, it was rooted in actual human experience. In the poetic activities we find a delicate interplay of personal and cultural memory, on the one hand, and estrangement from everyday reality, together with mental exaltation and unique insight, on the other. Such characteristics of creative inspiration as its ineffability and irresistibility, changing perception and the very nature of mental processes, experienced by modern poets and composers and identical to the ancient accounts, indicate that we are dealing with a real-life phenomenon, which can be defined as alteration of consciousness (Farthing 1992: 210–11).

Plato and Aristotle were aware of the importance of inspiration, and sensed it as coming from a supernatural external source.[19] The inspiration of a good poet was contagious: his audience was also elated, forgetful of their worries under the spell of the Muses. The artist's and his spectators' absorption in the world of fantasy and sounds, oblivion of surrounding reality, unusually acute sense of beauty, emotional rapture and profound comprehension were so distanced from the regular attitude of most people, including the poets themselves, that this state of mind was attributed to divine inspiration and defined as mania. The association of

[18] For the evidence, see: Borgeaud, 1988; Larson, 2001; Wagman, 2016.

[19] For poetic inspiration, see: Finkelberg, 1998; Guidorizzi, 2010; Lada-Richards, 2002.

poetic and musical activities with *enthousiasmos* and mania demonstrates that these concepts were very broad and could encompass the capricious states of intense creativity and transient elation.

Erotic mania

The Greek word *eros* is sometimes interpreted as love, which is misleading: it is infatuation, sexual desire bordering on passion. Sophocles' chorus, a mouthpiece of conventional views, sings to Eros: 'The one that has you is mad' (Sophocles, *Antigone* 781). An excess of *eros* can only be mania, and there is ample evidence that most Greeks would support this opinion. Plato considered erotic passion as an excellent example of the ambiguous kinds of mania. Together with his contemporaries who enjoyed love in a respectful fashion, Plato's Socrates thought that carnal passion out of control was definitely detrimental to the lover and the beloved. Here Plato parted ways with the ordinary people, suggesting that in an enlightened person, erotic mania in conjunction with ascetic discipline was conducive to a (mystical) union with the divine and therefore a blessing. Very few other people would agree with that.[20]

Erotic mania, considered as *enthousiasmos* or possession by Eros, hushed the voice of the mind, but did not take away one's wits completely. A more general corollary follows: to the Greeks, being in a state of mania did not necessarily mean being deranged to the extent of losing perception of reality. Subjective feelings of physical and mental commotion and objective abandon of self-restraint were sufficient to define a state as mania.

The philosopher's mania

Many modern scholars tend to disregard the importance of alterations of consciousness within the activities of ancient thinkers, on the simple grounds that their doctrines contained brilliant insights which were formulated in discursive form. I am convinced that there is no intrinsic contradiction between rational deliberate discourse and spontaneous flashes of illumination or insight. Among modern philosophers and scientists, more than a few arrived at their seminal ideas in dreams or trance-like reverie. The distinction between 'context of discovery' and 'context of justification' demonstrates that there is no conflict between revelation or inspiration, even when attributed to a deity, and logical deliberation (Hempel, 1966: 3–18). This concept elucidates the connection between mystic inspiration, logical validity and philosophical value of ideas put forward by ancient thinkers.

Rational argumentation and the final coherent form of the doctrines of Greek philosophers do not imply that the origin of the proposed tenets was in pure ratiocination. It is only to be expected that, for the most part, what Greek philosophers wrote stemmed from logical deliberation: Plato required long-term concentration on philosophizing before being endowed with a spark of insight; and rendering this insight in a comprehensible form would also be a long endeavour. However, it was the moment of illumination that was the pinnacle of the intellectual efforts and rendered them worthwhile.

Alterations of consciousness of several pre-Socratic thinkers can be assumed quite confidently. Life legends of the Archaic 'masters of truth' imply that, during that period, sages practised alterations of consciousness (Detienne, 1996). The ascetic practices of Pythagoras and his disciples, including sensory deprivation and fasting, along with the emphasis on ineffability of the resulting knowledge, indicate that alteration of consciousness held a place of honour in their methods of philosophizing (Burkert, 1972; Riedweg, 2005). Parmenides, the founder of the Eleatic school, expounds his creed and the way to it in a poem that contains a powerful depiction of a spiritual journey. The congruity between the ultimate reality of

[20] For a most insightful treatment of *eros* in Plato, see Harris, 2006. For Greeks and *eros*, see Calame, 1992.

Parmenides, essentially ineffable and perceived as direct revelation, and mystical reality is astonishing.[21] Empedocles' visions can be assumed on the basis of his own texts, as well as references to his madness by later writers (Kingsley, 1995).

There are four kinds of testimonies on Socrates' eccentricity, ranging from madness to weirdness. Plato's Socrates was quite aware of the fact that his behaviour looked bizarre or even mad to the masses, and said so in plain words (Plato, *Phaedo* 69CD; *Symposium* 218D). Plato compared Socrates' philosophizing to Bacchic initiations, and alluded to out-of-body experiences (*Phaedo* 66 DE, 67D; *Phaedrus* 250AE). Socrates' prolonged trance-like meditations could not happen if not in an altered state of consciousness (*Symposium* 174D–175C, 220D). In these three cases, Socrates' contemporaries probably referred to his behaviour as mania, and we can detect elements of a state which we call alteration of consciousness. The fourth one, namely Socrates' communication with a supernatural being known as his *daimonion*, although perhaps the most famous, does not seem to have troubled Socrates' contemporaries, who could either trust or mistrust his *daimonion*, but never insinuated that receiving its commands was more than a peculiarity (Plato, *Apologia* 31D, 40BC, 41D; *Phaedrus* 242BC; *Euthydemus* 272E; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1. 1. 4–5; Plutarch *Moralia* 588D; see Brisson, 2005; Bussanich, 2006; Morgan, 1990).

Plato's mystical experiences are implicitly alluded to in his writings, and explicitly attested to in the *Seventh Letter*. In this autobiographical document, considered by the majority of experts as authentic, Plato gives precious details on his own views and reports an ineffable, illuminatory experience (Plato, *Letters* 7. 341C; see Brisson, 1987). The perception of the union with the divine as a sexual union appears consistently enough in the dialogues for it to be regarded as an important part of Plato's own life. The soul's erotic desire for the divine is the erotic mania of the philosopher. Numerous passages, undoubtedly penned by Plato, allow the assumption that Plato himself knew the bliss of *unio mystica* and found erotic mania to be the closest possible verbal expression of this ineffable experience (*Republic* 490AB; *Phaedrus* 247CE; *Symposium* 210D, 212A; see Dodds, 1945; Ferber, 2007; Périllié, 2015; Robinson, 2000). Thus, states that we label as alterations of consciousness, and Plato and his contemporaries perceived as mania, were probably experienced by Plato, and played an important role in his search for the eternal truth.

Socrates, inspired by his meetings with the *daimonion*, in this respect belongs to the same line as Epimenides, who talked to the gods (Dodds, 1973: 141–6), and Parmenides and Empedocles, who encountered only one goddess or Muse. These thinkers were neither shamans nor mystics, although their activities comprised elements associated with shamanic or mystical clusters. Notwithstanding idiosyncrasies of these colourful figures, a pattern characterizing their modes of alteration of consciousness emerges: several early Greek philosophers appear to have intentionally manipulated their consciousness, and therefore were in a position to control it. Socrates and Plato possibly experienced alterations of consciousness, but these were spontaneous moments of illumination, that could occur in a most unpredictable place. Out-of-body experiences are alluded to persistently by almost all the individuals discussed. The manner of verbalization of visions attained in the state of altered consciousness evolved from epic poems comprising accounts of encounters with deities to oral conversations or written texts rendered in prose, describing revelations in much more abstract form. Although in the extant evidence Plato's Socrates alone refers to his own philosophizing as mania, it is only this designation of the spiritual quest that is unique: alterations of consciousness were probably experienced by several thinkers of the Archaic and Classical periods.

[21] The text: Graham, 2010, Vol. 2: 203–44; see also Ustinova, 2009: 191–209.

Conclusions

Both the Greek term *epipnoia* and the Latin *inspiratio*, from which the English word derives, convey the idea of breath, an airy invisible flow, entering a person from the outside, temporarily elevating him or her to an extraordinary level – of creativity, vision, knowledge, physical force or courage, and sometimes causing profound personality changes. When the Greeks witnessed a state of mind that was beyond comprehension in terms of regular experiences, they thought of mania: such phenomena were ascribed either to pure divine intervention or to an interaction of human and divine forces.

Mania involves a sense of loss of control or being led by an external power. The essence of mania is that it is a state of consciousness different from the baseline waking state of mind. It is a distortion, first and foremost of perception. Mentally disturbed people, as well as seers, poets and initiates see and hear what others do not. Mania is a state at the limits of human nature. An individual experiencing it might display abilities beyond the normal human range, but can also become wild like an animal, cause irreversible damage, or be unable to return to the former self. Hence, different types of mania aroused admiration and fear mixed in varying proportions. Abnormal and difficult to comprehend, mania belonged to the category of odd and inexplicable that immediately gives rise to awe and alienation.

The attitude of the majority of Greeks towards alteration of consciousness was not mere tolerance.[22] In Greece, practices involving mania were viewed as mainstream and actively endorsed by communities. Furthermore, many cultic and cultural phenomena involving states of mania were not innovations or foreign intrusions, but were venerated as part of the ancestral patrimony handed out from generation to generation.

In contrast, in the majority of complex societies, ancient and modern, ecstatic behaviour was often regarded as deviant, transgressing social norms, immoral and punishable, or eccentric and undesirable. People involved in rites of madness regularly belonged to underprivileged groups, such as ethnic minorities and former slaves (Lewis, 1989). Ecstatic rites were never prominent in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies. Outside the Greek world, inspired prophecy gained approval on an episodic basis only, in Israel of the monarchical period and in Mari. Egyptian tradition does not contain evidence on alteration of consciousness, and its absence from innumerable sources left by this civilization proves at the very least that this phenomenon was banished far away from the main concerns of the elite. In Mesopotamia, ecstatic rites existed, but remained marginal throughout the long history of the area. In Republican Rome, battlefield fury was promoted or tolerated, and poetic inspiration was well known, but other practices based on the manipulation of consciousness were, by and large, judged as negative and marginalized or prohibited.

The question is not why ecstatic practices were allowed in Greece, but why they remained part of normative, rather than fringe, socio-religious activities in the complex polis society. This is a problem in 'cultural epidemiology': ideas shared by a considerable part of the people in the community have effects not only on what people think, but also how they behave.[23] I have attempted to determine what cultural environment supported the existence of alteration of consciousness as a sustained cultural phenomenon. We have seen that 'the desire to alter consciousness is an innate, human, biologically based drive' (Winkelman, 2000: 7). The question is not 'Why do people tend to manipulate their consciousness?', but rather 'Why do societies restrict manipulation of consciousness?'. The natural tendency to enjoy alteration of consciousness and to trust the accompanying visions is limited or suppressed with the transition from traditional to complex societies, when practices involving alteration of consciousness, which are difficult to regulate, are usually pushed to the periphery or restrained

[22] On tolerance, see Garnsey, 1984.

[23] The concept was put forward by Sperber, 2001: 298; it was developed by Heintz, 2011.

by the elites striving to control the masses. Occasionally, societies behave in a different manner. Greece is one of these exceptions.

The reason for this singularity is the unique social situation, characteristic of the Greek city-states. Greece lacked overall religious authority endorsed by the state, and of course anything resembling central power. Since religious expertise was considered dispensable, no class or social group of people in charge of other people's cultic behaviour had ever emerged in Greece, creating a strong contrast to other parts of the Mediterranean. In the absence of a priestly caste, canonical tradition or sacerdotal hierarchy, the authority in religious matters largely stayed with the political power, but it usually did not attempt to control the religious behaviour of citizens (Garland, 1984, 1990; Parker, 2011: 40–63). As a consequence of the absence of rigid priestly authority and lack of ability or desire to interfere on the part of political powers, the Greeks made the most of the alterations of consciousness that many of them experienced, and developed mechanisms that allowed them successful exploitation of these phenomena. In other words, the Greek idea of freedom included the licence to manipulate consciousness and enjoy, with proper caution and awe, the resulting psychological and social benefits. The Greek lack of restrictions was exceptional, and it determined the unique social environment, a complex society that did not constrain, disdain or marginalize alterations of consciousness, but overtly admired and promoted its manifestations. Borrowing the concept of 'the immunology of cultural systems' introduced by Sørensen (2005), I suggest that the Greek cultural model did not develop 'immunal mechanisms' oppressing alteration of consciousness, and minimizing its impact on society. Plato contemplated this reality and defined the concept of the 'blessings of mania', which offers a very important insight into Greek society and culture.

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