

Enhancing the Mind in Ancient Greece

Plato's Academy
Mosaic from Pompeii
first cent. BC/AD



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Suda, s.v. *epipnoia*:

Epipnoia is *enthousiasmos*

Inspiration in engoddedness
(possession, seizure by a deity)

Inspired performer

Amphora, attributed to the Berlin Painter, ca.

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Plan of the presentation

Inspiration and methods of its attaining

- ▶ of ancient Greek philosophers (Plato and Socrates)
- ▶ of traditional sages (Pythagoras)
- ▶ of prophetic priests (at Claros)

Aims of the presentation

- ▶ to describe ancient Greek practices
- ▶ to underscore the interaction between cross-cultural aspiration for mind enhancement and historically conditioned environment of a particular culture

Mental experiences of exceptional intensity and divine intervention

Mortals who tried to communicate with the divine

Plutarch, *Solon 12* (on Epimenides, one of the Archaic sages):

‘acquired the knowledge of the divine by means of ecstatic wisdom’

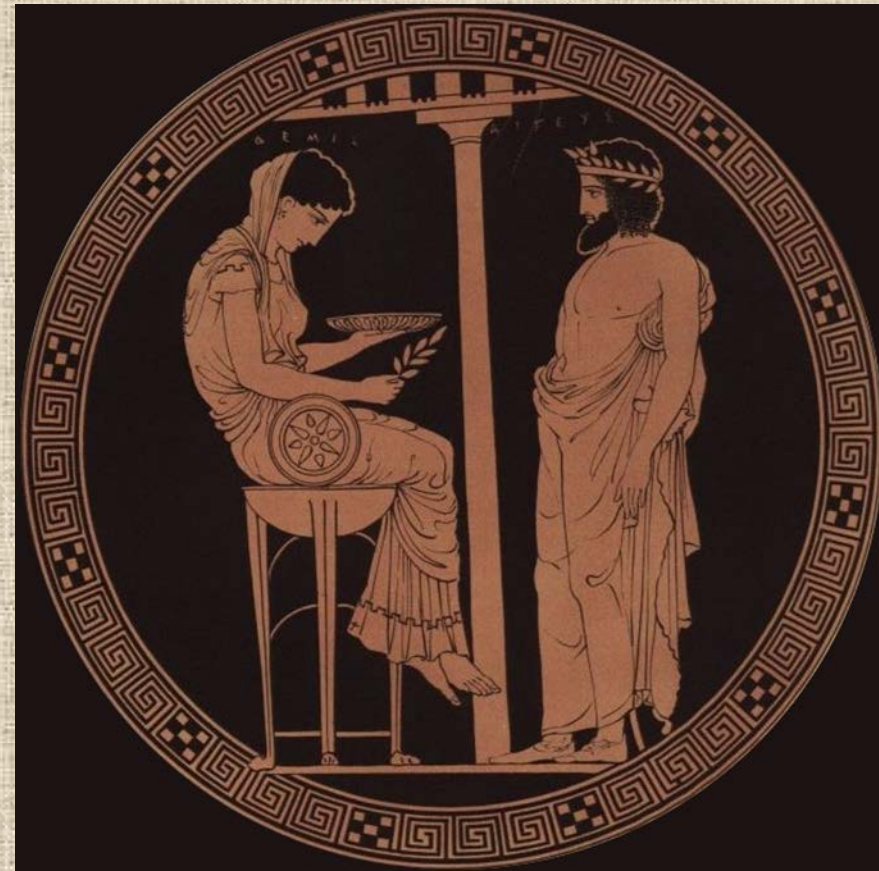


A poet and the Muses. Hesiod Painter, 460-450 BC

Methods of consciousness manipulation

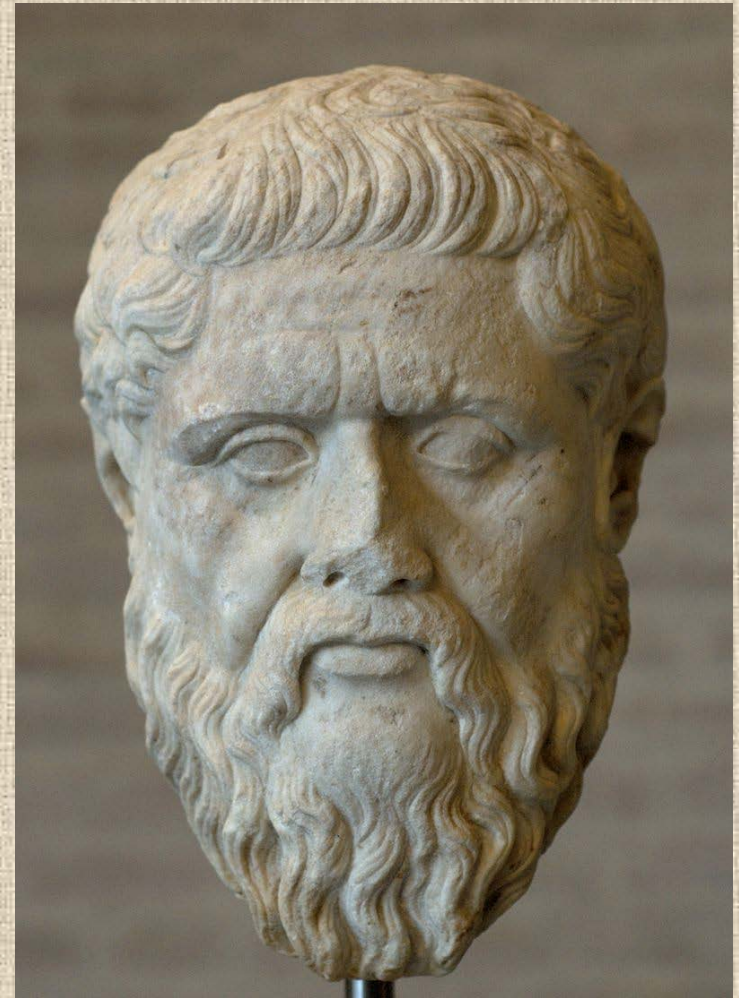
- ▶ Some mystics claimed that they could release their souls at will; independent of the body, the soul could achieve superhuman knowledge
- ▶ Others attained states of intense concentration by means of meditation-like techniques
- ▶ The state construed in antiquity as possession by a deity, divinely inspired madness, enabled temporary abandonment of the human self and transformed an individual into a medium

The Pythia (Apollo's prophetic medium at Delphi) and an enquirer
The Vulci cup, Codrus Painter
440-430 BC



Plato and ecstatic revelation

- ▶ Plato associates philosophical doctrines with ecstatic revelation
- ▶ Perhaps experienced mystical revelation himself



Plato

427-347 BC

Roman copy of a work by Silanion,
fourth cent. BC

Plato on illumination

Plato, *Letters* 7. 341C, translation R. G. Bury

There does not exist, nor will ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing with these subject. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, **as a result of continued application** to the subject itself and **communion** therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul **of a sudden**, as **light that is kindled by a leaping spark**, and thereafter it nourishes itself.

Modern thinkers on illumination



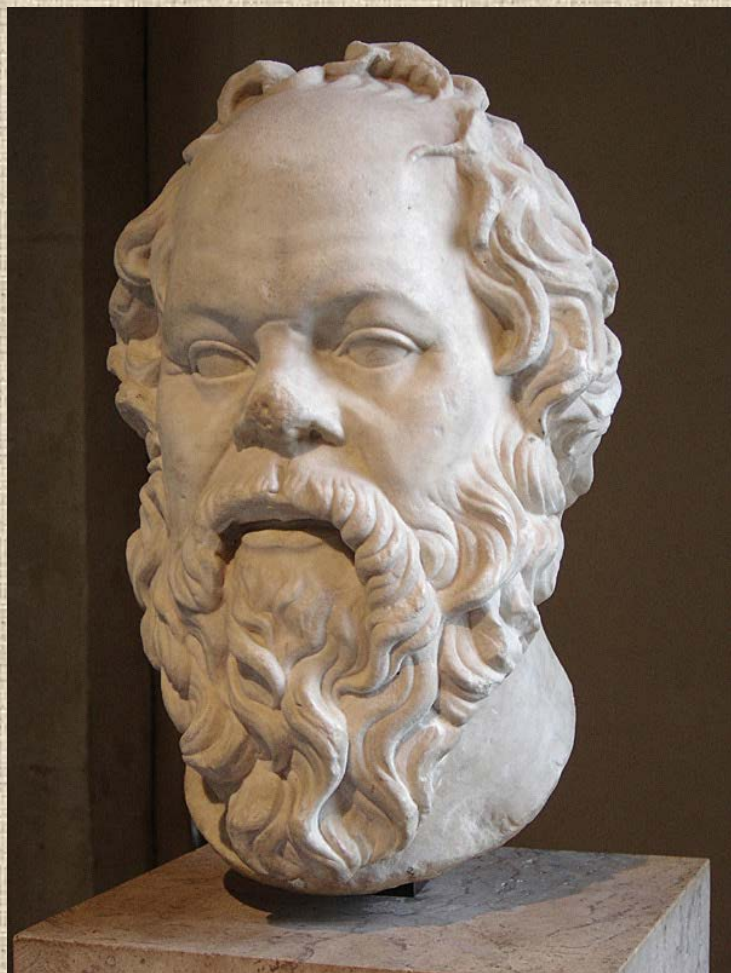
C. F. Gauss
painting by C. A. Jensen (1840)

Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855):

Finally, two days ago, I succeeded, not on account on **my painful efforts**, but by the grace of God. Like **a sudden flash of lightning**, the riddle happened to be solved. I myself cannot say what was the conducting thread which connected what I previously knew with what made my success possible.

J. Hadamard, *The Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field*. Princeton, 1945:
15

Socrates and ecstatic revelation



- ▶ prolonged trance-like meditations
- ▶ allusions at out-of-body experiences
- ▶ feeling of divine intrusion: sudden experience of 'indisputable truth'

Socrates (ca 470-399 BC)
Roman copy of a Greek original,
perhaps a bronze statue by Lysippos'
fourth cent. BC

Socrates on separation of the mind from the body

Plato *Phaedo* 67CD, translation H. N. Fowler:

And does not the purification consist in this which has been mentioned long ago in our discourse, **in separating, as far as possible, the soul from the body** and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all the parts of the body, and living, so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed from the body as from fetters?



Winged representation of the dead man's soul
sixth cent. BC

Socrates' *daimonion*



Socrates
imprint of a Roman carnelian gem
first cent. BC/first cent. AD

Plato, *Phaedrus* 242BC, translation H. N. Fowler

When I was about to cross the stream, **the spirit (*daimonion*)** and the sign that usually comes to me came - it always holds me back from something I am about to do - and **I thought I heard a voice from it which forbade** my going away before clearing my conscience, as if I had committed some sin against deity.

Socratic ‘practice of mental withdrawal and concentration’

(E. R. Dodds)

Plato, *Symposium* 220CD, translation W. R. M. Lamb:

Immersed at some problem at dawn, he stood in the same spot considering it; and when he found it a tough one... he stood there trying. The time drew on to midday, and the men began to notice him... The end of it was that in the evening some of the Ionians ... brought out their mattresses and rugs... They thus waited to see if he would go on standing all night too. He stood till dawn came and the sun rose; then walked away, after offering a prayer to the Sun.



*A break in warfare
Achilles and Ajax at Troy*
Exekias, 540-530 BC

The Presocratics

Pythagoras (ca 570-495 BC)

A natural philosopher or a
founder of a sect?



Man holding a lyre
The Docimasia Painter, ca. 480 BC

Pythagoras' methods of attaining revelations

- ▶ Descents to subterranean spaces



Pythagoras Emerging from the Underworld
Salvator Rosa (1662)

- ▶ Special diet and/or fasting

- ▶ Breathing exercises

Empedocles, fragment B129 Diels-Kranz

...a man of outstanding knowledge, who possessed the greatest wealth of *prapides* and became especially capable of all wise deeds. For whenever he stretched his *prapides*, easily he contemplated each of the things existing in the tenth and twentieth generation of men.

Inferences concerning Greek intellectuals

- ▶ Common origin of Greek poets, prophets and philosophers of the Archaic and Classical ages, especially their conscious attribution of knowledge to divine inspiration, in particular by Apollo, the divine ecstatic-poet-prophet ('shaman-figure').
- ▶ Prominent intellectuals made efforts to manipulate their consciousness with the aim of attaining states of mind favourable for getting inspiration, and employed traditional age-old practices for this purpose.



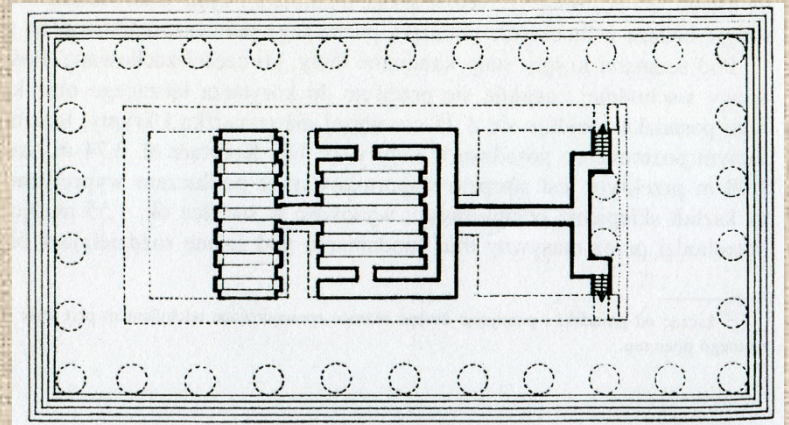
Apollo with a lyre, a crow in front of him
kylix (drinking cup),
ca. 480 BC, Delphi

Oracular practices

The sanctuary of Apollo at Claros



The sanctum from above



Plan of the temple

Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* .3. 11, translation E. C. Clarke, J. M. Dillon, and J. P. Hershbell:

[The medium, while in the grip of the god was] neither himself nor has any consciousness of what he says and where on earth he is, so that even after prophesying, he sometimes scarcely gets control of himself.



The subterranean grotto

The diviner at Claros

- ▶ had to abstain from food for a day and a night before descending into the underground chamber, where he drank from the sacred source
- ▶ possessed no special education
- ▶ distanced himself from ordinary mortals (withdrew from human affairs, lived in an inaccessible place)
- ▶ the strain of prophesying: drinking the sacred water was considered as life-shortening

In modern terms

- ▶ The medium at Claros, an individual endowed with a proclivity for alteration of consciousness, attained this state due to the effect of his descent into the underground grotto, enhanced by earlier preparations.

Inferences concerning Greek culture

- ▶ Seers, poets, and enlightened thinkers see and hear what others do not.
- ▶ When the Greeks witnessed a state of mind that was beyond comprehension in terms of regular experiences, they thought of engoddedness – *enthousiasmos* in Greek: such phenomena were ascribed either to pure divine intervention or to an interaction of human and divine forces.
- ▶ In order to attain this state, intellectuals used methods comparable with the techniques applied in vision quest by traditional sages and in oracular practices.



*Socrates conversing with a
Muse*
Roman sarcophagus
Ca 150 AD

Conclusions: history of mind enhancement

- ▶ Various techniques of mind enhancement were widely used in the past, e.g. in ancient Greece.
- ▶ Some characteristics of these practices are universal. Rational thinkers and spiritual seekers, in the past (e.g. ancient Greece) and nowadays, report some congruent experiences that they regard as salient.
- ▶ Mind enhancement and its techniques are conditioned to a significant extent by culture.



Orpheus playing a lyre
Orpheus Painter
ca 450 BC

Thanks!

Apollo seated on a winged tripod
ca. 490,
attributed to the Berlin Painter

