

Anthropological and Neuropsychiatric Approaches Towards Understanding *Menos* in Greek Mythology

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***Menos* for the Homeric Greeks**

A central element pertaining to the ancient Greek myths is the relationship between intense psycho-physical states and the Greek divinities. Although the Homeric Greeks had not established the idea of a synthesised *psyche* which we find in Plato, they believed that there existed various entities which either resided in the chest region of humans or entered the body by external agencies.¹ During the Homeric age (circa 1200-600 BCE), the body was considered as a porous receptacle for the entering and exiting of psycho-physical energies.

First, there was *thymos* where affective states originated. *Thymos* resided in the chest, within the *phrenes* – a psychological faculty which Homer and Hesiod mention. The *phrenes* were associated with both mortals and the Olympians. *Phrenes* is sometimes mentioned with *thymos* as two integrated psychological elements in order to amplify a specific affective state, invariably anger. The *phrenes* operated in a co-operative manner with the individual.² Also, the *phrenes* consisted of affective, cognitive and volitional elements, and is cognate to some degree with the

¹ Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*. 4th Edition (Gottingen: Einaudi Editore 1975).

² Shirley Darcus Sullivan, "Phrenes in Hesiod," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 67(1) (1989) 5-17.

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synthesis of limbic and cortical regions of the cerebrum. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, 554, Zeus's *phrenes* become full of *thymos* in response to Prometheus's trickery:

χάσατο δὲ φρένας ἀμφί, χόλος δὲ μιν ἴκετο θυμόν,
ὡς ἴδεν ὀστέα λευκά βοός δολίγι ἐπὶ τεχνῆσι³

He (Zeus) was angry about his *phrenes* and anger came to him in his *thymos*, when he saw the white bones of the ox [placed] with deceptive skill.

Another interesting psychological element which is widely mentioned by Homer and Hesiod is *menos* which I will focus on henceforth. *Menos* can be defined as a frenetic impulse, unrestrained aggression, and combat rage. *Menos* derives from the verb *μενοιναν* "to be fervent", and shares similarity with the Greek verb *meneainein* ("anger" or "striving"). The irrationality which *menos* invokes attests to the indeterminate nature of the gods and nature. *Menos* is fury unleashed, a state by which the gods shape humans into a weapon of brutal force towards fulfilling an objective. Unlike *thymos*, *menos* did not reside in the body but was rather possessed by divinities. Examples of *menos* are common in Homeric literature. It is Athena who fills Telemachus, son of Odysseus with *menos* in order to confront his mother's suitors. It is also the self-same goddess who thrusts excessive *menos* into the *phrenes* of her beloved Diomedes. A striking case of *menos* is depicted in Hector⁴ with eyes gleaming and foaming mouth.⁵ It is significant that *menos* endows the recipient with tremendous strength and vigour. The

³ Martin Litchfield West, *Hesiod, Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1966).

⁴ *Iliad*, book 15.

⁵ Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1951) 10.

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performance of unusual feats of strength (*ρέα*) signified divine power.⁶ Yet, as Dodds explains, *menos* was an extraordinary experience as it was derived by the gods' will.⁷ For instance, Homer states that the onset of *menos* was noticeable by somatic changes such as animation (*μαιμωωσι*) and sprightliness (*ελαφρα*) of the limbs.⁸ Moreover, Homer declares that Ares, god of war, entered Hector's body, invigorating his limbs upon wearing Achilles's armour.

This divine infusion or *ousia* (essence) of the divine into human was often correlated with breath – the gods “breathing” into a hero thereby arousing *menos*. The “Other” could also be idealised as a shade or dream persona.⁹ However, it is via the breath that the gods infused mortals with *menos*. This is not surprising. The ancient Greeks like other cultures drew a correlation between the breath, life and spirit. The Greek word *enthusiasmos*, meaning “to inspire,” equates with breath.

The Greek word root *pnu* forms the basis of various verbs such as *pneiô* and *pnoiê* which indicate the act of breathing.¹⁰ These correspond with the word *empneiô*, referring to the action of “breathing into or upon”.¹¹ Homer¹² uses the verb *ampneiôin* in relation to life that is animated by a divine force. The Greek noun *pneuma* (spirit/soul) also derives from root *pnu*. Thus, as earlier mentioned, Athena's “breath” (*pnoiêi*) infused Diomedes with surfeit *menos* after which he was

⁶ Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1983).

¹⁰ Gerard Naddaf, “The origin and meaning of poetic inspiration in ancient Greece.” Seminar Presentation. (The University of Sydney, November 10, 2011) 1-31.

¹¹ *Iliad*, book 20.110; *Odyssey*, 9.381.

¹² *Iliad*, book 5.697, 22.222.

able to wound the war god Ares. In the *Odyssey*, old Laertes was reinvigorated by a goddess's breath (*empneuse menos mega*),¹³ while a god breathes *menos* into Odysseus and his men (*tharsos enepneusen mega daimôn*) during their ordeal with the cyclops Polyphemus.¹⁴

Anthropological understandings of *menos*

It is important to note that for the Homeric Greeks human psycho-physical energies were embodiments of natural forces. In other words, the forces governing the physical universe were believed to be similar in quality to those operating in human life.¹⁵ This is probably why for the Greeks mind states of the gods could be transferred within human experience.

From an anthropological perspective *menos* can be considered as a dis-associative state – a type of altered state of consciousness, resembling a state of hyper-arousal, ecstasy or mania practiced in many religious traditions.

A considerable amount of anthropological studies have examined dis-associative states over the last one hundred years. These include trance, hypnosis, spirit possession and ecstatic states.¹⁶ However, such states are loosely categorised and often overlap in anthropological

¹³ Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1951) 51ff.

¹⁴ *Odyssey*, 2.320; 16.529.

¹⁵ R.L. Scranton, "Myth in myth," in *Truth, Myth and Symbol*, eds. T.J.J. Altizer, W.A. Beardslee, and J.H. Young, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1982) 79-85.

¹⁶ See, Ian M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore: Penguin 1971); Ian M. Lewis, *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma*. 2nd Edition (Cambridge; New York:

literature. A common element of hyper-arousal dissociative states is the temporary detachment or disengagement from ordinary consciousness, which enables the individual to perform with a considerable degree of disinhibition and capacity for contravening social norms and customs. According to Victor Turner,¹⁷ behavioural disinhibition and contradiction of social norms is intrinsic to the *liminal* phase of some rituals. However, the liminal phase is temporary – individuals eventually must return to society, symbolically renewed and expected to maintain the social status quo.

What is of concern here is that altered states of consciousness operate within a cultural framework that provides meaning to both participants and audience. Although, the psychological substrates of hyper-arousal or ecstatic states are inherent to *Homo*, the behavioural elements of such states are informed by cultural processes.¹⁸ Importantly, while the anthropology of altered states of consciousness such as spirit possession varies cross-culturally, Keener observes that there are similarities in the common experience of possession phenomena.¹⁹

Cambridge University Press 1996); Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press 1994); Erika Bourguignon, *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press 1973); Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (London: University of California Press 1981).

¹⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine 1969).

¹⁸ Erika Bourguignon, "An Assessment of Some Comparisons and Implications," in *Religion, States, altered States of Consciousness, and Change*, ed. Erika Bourguignon (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973) 321-339.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, "Spirit Possession as a Cross-cultural Experience," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.2, (2010) 218.

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Eliade²⁰ regards the widespread phenomena of ecstatic states and their cross-cultural similarities as a “universal grammar of symbols”.²¹ For example, members of the Hamadsha Sufi brotherhood perform a highly animated trance dance called the *hadra* for curing individuals who are deemed to be spirit possessed.²² In North India, Qalandar Sufis engage in a type of poetry called *nara* during altered states of consciousness. *Nara* range from idiosyncratic expressions to intelligible structures that are uttered aloud, and are accompanied by bodily shaking, arm waving, and laughter. The ecstatic nature of *nara* is considered as manifesting a Sufi’s communion with Ali, son-in-law to the Prophet Muhammad and spiritual custodian of Sufism.²³ In a similar vein, Christian charismatic *glossalalia* (speaking in tongues) is conducted within a cultural milieu of shared symbols.²⁴ Suggestive in both *nara* and *glossalalia* are cultural patterns which embody and convey transcendental truths.²⁵ Elaborating from Zuesse, Doty notes that altered states of consciousness produced within sacred rituals go beyond representing social ideals of the divine other – they bridge the ideational and somatic, the “bodily and the mythic.”²⁶ I would like to elaborate on this idea.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1972) 8.

²¹ Robert Ryan, *The Strong Eye of Shamanism: A Journey into the Caves of Consciousness* (Rochester, New York: Inner Traditions 1999) 4.

²² Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (London: University of California Press 1981).

²³ Arthur Saniotis, “Speaking With the Saints: *Hukm* as a Creative Source of *Faqirs*’ Mystical Expression,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12(3) (2001) 355-366.

²⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1997).

²⁵ Evan M. Zuesse, “Meditation on Ritual,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43(3) (1975) 517-530.

²⁶ William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press 1986) 112.

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A universal theme found in world mythologies centres around human conceptions of the sacred “Other”, and how it is experienced and imagined by the self.²⁷ The view of the sacred “Other” as a source of mystery, power, awe, and creativity is developed by William James’s notion of the “ontological imagination.”²⁸ Here again, several kinds of *techniques du corps* have been extensively used in numerous societies over millennia in order to achieve a *communitas* state with the sacred “Other”. These include dancing, chanting, use of psychotropic substances, pain, drumming, sleep deprivation, hyperventilation and fasting.

By the time of the Greek Classical period, the Greeks used a variety of techniques for achieving altered states of consciousness including chanting, dancing, hyperventilating, fasting and sensory deprivation. These methods were mainly used by initiates in the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries. In the latter, participants allegedly took the hallucinogen *kykeon* (probably derived from ergot) in order to achieve altered states of consciousness.

The psyche for the Homeric Greeks was often associated with concept of the “Other.” The “Other” could manifest itself in various natural and subliminal forms such as “shade” and “dreams.”²⁹ As Herdt points out, the Homeric Greeks did not ascribe any abstract duties to the psyche:

²⁷ Michele Stephen, “Constructing Sacred Worlds and Autonomous Imagining in New Guinea” in *The Religious Imagination in New Guinea*, ed. by Gilbert Herdt and Michele Stephen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1989) 211-236.

²⁸ William W. James, *Varieties of the Religious Experience* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books 1963).

²⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1983) 308.

The origins of mental life and the sources of intentionality were generally ascribed to agencies outside the person. Intense mental states, such as courage on the battlefield, were infusions from the gods.³⁰

From the *arkteia* of the *Brauronia* festival where Athenian girls behaved as bears to the frenzied comportment of the *bacchae*, to Greek poets and dramatists, such depictions of altered states of consciousness (ASC) were attributed to external forces.³¹ This belief continued to the Classical period. Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates states: “But there is also a madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men.”³² For the Homeric Greeks, Achilles’s or Hector’s *menos*, manifested the dominion, awe and indeterminacy of the gods. *Menos* was a method for embodying the primal power of the sacred “Other” – raw, unrestrained, and terrible.

I would argue that the madness invoked during *menos* was a way in which early Greeks could create and maintain *communitas* with the sacred “Other.” In psychological terms, *menos* was a technique for mimicking the forces of nature that were a source of *mysterium et tremendum* for the Homeric Greeks. The anthropologist Michael Taussig is instructive here. He argues that humans seek to understand the “Other” via mimesis – by copying or embodying it.³³ The human capacity to mimic the “Other” through similitude enables the ability for Othering; for gaining a kind of self-mastery over the lifeworld.³⁴ In this way, knowing is body-centred. Human beings copy the world in order to make sense of it through their bodies. Indeed, this need to attain self-mastery or *auctoritas* is engendered by the heroes of the Homeric myths. *Menos* provided a way for heroes to

³⁰ Michele Stephen, and Gilbert Herdt, *The Religious Imagination in New Guinea*. G. Herdt & M. Stephen eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1989) 30.

³¹ Inge Nielsen, “The sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia: can architecture and iconography help to locate the settings of the rituals?” in *From Artemis to Diana: The Goddess of Man and Beast*. Acta Hyperborea 12, eds. by T. Fischer-Hansen and B. Poulsen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum 2009) 77-109.

³² *The Dialogues of Plato Phaedrus* by Plato, translated by B. Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, Lowe & Brydone 1892) 39.

³³ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge 1993).

³⁴ Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1997).

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distinguish themselves as conduits of divine will – for reifying the presence of the gods in the lives of mortals.

Neuropsychiatry of menos

In the previous section, I defined *menos* as a hyper-arousal dis-associative state which is cognate with ecstatic states such as spirit possession. I used a cross cultural analysis in order to draw out resemblances between *menos* and extant ecstatic traditions. In this section, I will examine neuropsychiatric elements of *menos*.

What we do know of the neurobiology of altered states of consciousness is that they are generated via the mutual activation of limbic and autonomic systems that regulate external and visceral stimuli. The limbic system includes the amygdala, hypothalamus, septal nuclei, hippocampus, thalamus and cingulate cortex. These areas receive and send projections to many cortical and sub-cortical regions. Slow wave projections of the limbic system coordinate with the frontal cortex for producing a synthesis of cognition, emotion and behaviour.³⁵ Altered states of consciousness also produce neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine and epinephrine that affect limbic and cortical areas. Euphoria produced during altered states of consciousness is associated to theta wave activity, possibly by the influence of dopamine. Moreover, the manoeuvring of emotions during hyper-arousal states stimulate opioid production in the limbic system, thus, creating a positive biofeedback loop where emotions and opioids intensify emotional experience which in turn stimulate opioid secretion.³⁶

Improvements to neuroimaging techniques over the last generation have enabled researchers to further investigate neurological substrates of altered states of consciousness. Much of this neuroimaging supported research has focussed on meditators from various religious traditions. For instance, neuroimaging has detected various benefits associated with mindfulness

³⁵ Michael Winkelman, “Shamanism and Cognitive Evolution,” *Cambridge Archeol. J.* 12 (2002) 71-101.

³⁶ Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey 2000) 200.

meditation (a modified version of Buddhist Vipassana) such as improved cerebral blood circulation,³⁷ increased cortical thickness in various cortical areas,³⁸ reduced pain response due to changes in the insula and prefrontal cortex,³⁹ and reduced amygdala response.⁴⁰

However, a recent study examined the brains of several shamanic practitioners using 8 minute neuro scans, where they were instructed when to enter and exit trance.⁴¹ Neuroimaging results identified increased coactivation in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and insula cortex, both control network areas involved in neural flow regulation, and the posterior cingulate cortex, which is implicated in the default mode network where it is thought to synchronise external and internal modes of focussed attention.⁴²

Interestingly, both shamanic trance parallels *menos* not only due to their absorptive states, but also because of their shifting between different realities. Shamanic practitioners report that the experience of altered states of consciousness is characterised by a continuous cascade of symbols, images and spirits that resembles dreaming.⁴³ This coincides with recent neuroimaging findings (PET, fMRI) that suggest that day dreaming is an augmented version of mind wandering.⁴⁴ The

³⁷ A.B. Newberg, N. Wintering, M.R. Waldman, D. Amen, and D.S. Khalsa, et al, “Cerebral Blood Flow Differences Between Long-Term Meditators and Non-Meditators,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 19 (2010) 899–905.

³⁸ J.A. Grant, E.G. Duerdena, J. Courtemanche, M. Cherkasova, and G.H. Duncan, et al, “Cortical Thickness, Mental Absorption and Meditative Practice: Possible Implications For Disorders of Attention,” *Biological Psychology* 92 (2013) 275–281.

³⁹ T Gard, B.K. Hölzel, A.T. Sack, H. Hempel, S.W. Lazar, D. Vaitl, and U. Ott, “Pain Attenuation Through Mindfulness is Associated With Decreased Cognitive Control and Increased Sensory Processing in the Brain,” *Cereb Cortex* 22 (2012) 2692-2702.

⁴⁰ P. Goldin, M. Ziv, H. Jazaieri, K Hahn, and J.J. Gross, “MBSR vs Aerobic Exercise in Social Anxiety: fMRI of Emotion Regulation of Negative Self-Beliefs,” *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci.* 8 (2013) 65-72.

⁴¹ Michael J. Hove, Johannes Stelzer, Till Nierhaus, Sabrina D. Thiel, Christopher Gundlach, and Daniel S. Margulies, et al., “Brain Network Reconfiguration and Perceptual Decoupling During an Absorptive State of Consciousness,” *Cerebral Cortex* 26 (2016) 3116–3124.

⁴² Hove et al. 2016.

⁴³ Hove et al. 2016, p. 3121.

⁴⁴ Kieran C.R. Fox, Savannah Nijeboer, Elizaveta Solomonova, G. William Domhoff and Kalina Christoff, “Dreaming as Mind wandering: Evidence From Functional neuroimaging and First-Person Content Reports,” *Front. Hum. Neurosci.* (2013) | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00412>

implication here is that these two types of mental processes should be considered as a unitary continuum, where each informs the other.

The implication is that fantasy and dreams are part of a single continuing fantasy process which is subject to certain transformations imposed by physiological and stimulus events.⁴⁵

At this point, we should speculate whether *menos* resembles a psychopathology. Although, I have drawn some correlations between *menos* and shamanic induced ecstatic states, *menos* is distinguishable on various criteria. Firstly, as portrayed in the Iliad, the experience of *menos* is both involuntary and unpredictable. In contrast, shamanic altered states of consciousness are most always voluntary and are marked by a preparatory period.⁴⁶ Second, a major aim in shamanic altered states of consciousness is to reintegrate aspects of the human psyche that may otherwise lead to psychopathology if left untreated. As Flor et al. note:

This capacity for voluntary induction and termination of seemingly pathological brain states coupled with the availability of the internally derived trance information for subsequent analytical processing is the defining characteristic of functional trance states and shamanic states of consciousness (SSCs), which distinguishes them from psychopathology.⁴⁷

The psychotherapeutic focus of shamanic ecstatic states is absent in *menos* – the latter is destructive, violent, often unleashing an uncontrolled bloodlust. Again, the capricious element of

⁴⁵ Eric Klinger, *Structure and Functions of Fantasy* (New York, NY: Wiley-Interscience 1971) 57

⁴⁶ Pierre Etevenon, "Meditation as a State of Consciousness: A Personal Account," *Human Cognitive Neurophysiology* 3 (2010) 1–26.

⁴⁷ Pierre Flor-Henry, Yakov Shapiro, Corine Sombrun, "Brain changes during a shamanic trance: Altered modes of consciousness, hemispheric laterality, and systemic psychobiology," *Cogent Psychology* 4 (2017) 1-25.

menos embodies cosmic anger, highlighted by Demeter's arbitrary *menos* which is intent to destroy humanity, even though humans were not involved in her daughter's abduction.⁴⁸

According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders, *menos* bears a strong likeness with symptoms of Dissociative Trance Disorder. This is because *menos* is involuntary and involves in the transformation of identity, that is attributed to the influence of a supernatural host or power.⁴⁹ The problem here is that *menos*, albeit, dictated by the whims of the gods, provides heroes the energy to achieve certain goals no matter how savage the process entails. Notwithstanding this, *menos* is cognate with psychosis. In both, inhibitory centres of the neocortex seem to be temporarily suspended, enabling emotions generated by the limbic system and subcortical areas (i.e. hypothalamus) to produce an exaggerated sympathetic response.

Current neuroimaging has shown a strong correlation between psychopathy/lack of empathy and dysfunctional areas in the frontal and temporal lobes.⁵⁰ These areas are closely connected to the limbic system and act to control emotional response. Individuals experiencing mania often exhibit euphoric behaviours and psychomotor arousal.⁵¹ In addition, noradrenaline increases emotional stress response, in particular rage, fear and anxiety.⁵² The emotions fear and rage regulate fight/flight response that is orchestrated by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. However, excessive glucocorticoid production due to stress may also contribute to hyper-arousal-

⁴⁸ Iliad 22: 347-356.

⁴⁹ Flor et al., 2017, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Katarina Howner, Marianne Kristiansson, "Aggression, Psychopathy and Brain Imaging - Review and Future Recommendations," International Journal of Law and Psychiatry 32(4) (2009) 266-271.

⁵¹ Ken-ichi Yamamoto, Toshikazu Shinba, and Mitsunobu Yoshii, "Psychiatric Symptoms of Noradrenergic Dysfunction: A Pathophysiological View," Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences 68 (2014) 1-20.

⁵² Ken-ichi Yamamoto et al., 2014, p. 8.

driven aggressiveness, that is evident in intermittent explosive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵³

Neuropsychiatric speculation regarding *menos* is a difficult endeavor due to its cultural adoption by the Homeric Greeks. The battle field butchery of the Trojan war so gleefully illustrated by Homer provides a looking glass into the dire nature of hand to hand combat of that period. Perhaps, excessive sympathetic arousal resembling aggressive psychopathy had fitness value in the ancient combat arena. In any case, *menos* became valorised as a visible marker of divine favor.

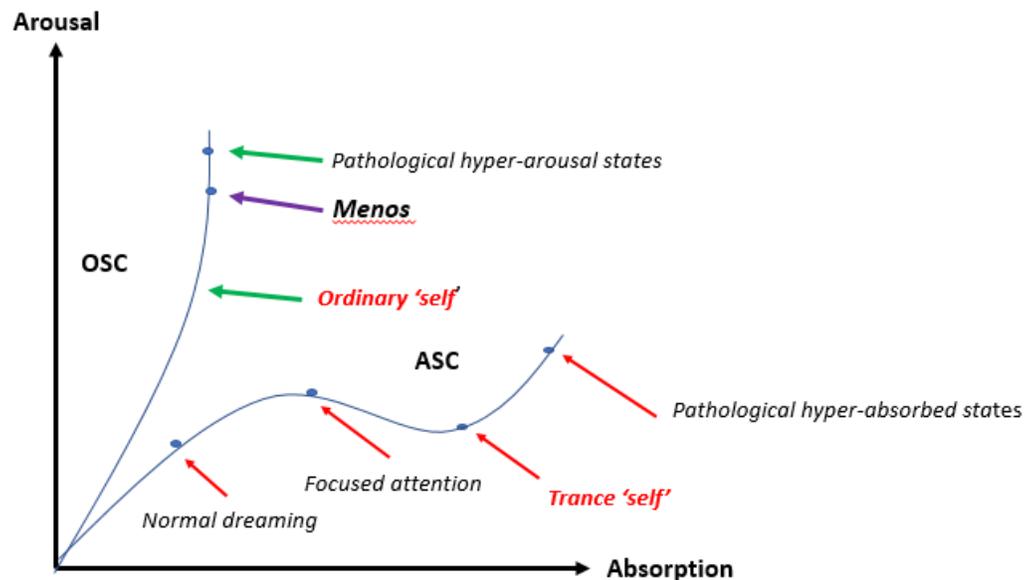


Figure 1. Ordinary states of consciousness versus altered states of consciousness as a function of arousal/absorption. *Menos* is shown to be closer to pathological hyper-arousal states. Modified from Flor-Henry et al. (2015).

⁵³ Henning Vaeroy, Frida Schneider, and Sergueï O. Fetissov, "Neurobiology of Aggressive Behavior—Role of Autoantibodies Reactive With Stress-Related Peptide Hormones," *Front Psychiatry* 10 (2019) 872.

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