

Editoriale

Subjects Beyond Themselves

Ecstasy and Vision in Western Thought

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In its literal meaning, the term ἔκστασις (*ekstasis*) indicates a displacement, ‘being out of immobility’, and ultimately being outside oneself. To some extent, this term takes on a mystical connotation in late Antiquity, notably in book VI.9.11.24 of Plotinus’ *Enneads*, where *ekstasis* is described as a non-ordinary way of seeing. The notion of ecstasy, often inseparable from the concept of vision, would keep its mystical role, though altered in some ways, over the centuries, conceptualizing a specific kind of knowledge, which goes beyond the subject-object opposition, addressing the epistemological issues of perceiving and knowing the divine, and often challenging the nature of the self. This issue offers some attempts to track the constant reshaping and migration of the notions of ecstasy and intellectual or spiritual vision over the history of Western thought, unearthing their structural and constant persistence, from the Middle Ages to the contemporary ages, recurrently in many different non-ultimately-dialectical metaphysical systems. The papers in this volume provide some illustrative examples of the tangled history of the divergent meanings that the notions of ecstasy and vision have taken on, and their considerable reassessments and adaptations to constantly evolving conceptual frameworks, often redefining further notions such as those of rapture, prophecy, sleep, dream, and death.

The present issue of *Lo Sguardo* deals with the broad and partially unexplored history of the notions of ecstasy and intellectual or spiritual vision¹.

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¹ See, among the latest contributions to the field, A. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism. A Short History*, Leiden-Boston 2000; B. McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, New York

States of ecstasy and vision are somehow undisputable psychological phenomena of the human mind, and – whatever their ultimate cause is – theology and philosophy endeavored to account for them, or to associate them with specific gnosiological prerogatives. This is also why they became two pivotal and often inseparable concepts for the whole of Western thought starting from ancient times, and they have been crucial for the intersection of philosophy and theology in particular. Thereby, their history has benefitted from countless in-depth scholarly reconstructions, devoted to those specific authors, traditions, systems, or periods that acknowledged important theoretical or theological functions for these concepts.

Even though receiving the remarkable results of these investigations, this collection of papers wants to be peculiar in its reconstructive stance. It avoids taking ecstasy and vision just as the main characters of illustrious yet ended erudite stories, and rather attempts at a ‘long’ historical survey, crossing the centuries and continuing into the present. Accordingly – from the Middle Ages to the modern period until the contemporary age – the papers making up this issue follow the constant reshaping and the migration of these two concepts over the long run. Given such an extensive timeframe, it is of course not possible to provide a glimpse of all the fluctuations and transformations of these notions across the world. But the conceptual and historical continuity between the many articles here collected aims at least at unearthing the structural and constant persistence of ecstasy and vision over the history of Western thought, even if under considerable reassessments and adaptations to constantly evolving conceptual frameworks.

Due to such a centuries-long story, those of ecstasy and vision are loose notions, whose meaning fluctuates depending on the metaphysical, theological, and gnosiological premises (and scopes) within which they are conceived. However, as is well-known, in its literal meaning the term ἔκστασις (*ekstasis*) indicates a displacement, ‘being out of immobility’, and thus a state of loss, ultimately meaning to be *outside* oneself.

To some extent, this term takes on a mystical meaning in late Antiquity. Its core can be notably found in book VI.9.11.24 of Plotinus’s *Enneads*. In this passage – within a strong metaphysical framework – *ekstasis* is described as the incommunicable vision of and ultimate union with the transcendent divine, the One or the Good. *Ekstasis* is then described as a non-ordinary way of seeing, «another kind of seeing»², as it implies the complete union of the seeing subject,

2006; P. L. Gavrilyuk and S. Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge 2012; A. D. DeConick and G. Adamson (eds.), *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, Durham 2013; H. Samuelson-Tirosh and A. Hughes (eds.), *Moshe Idel. Representing God*, Leiden 2014.
² Plotinus, *Enneads*, ed. A. H. Armstrong, vol. 7, Cambridge (MA)-London 1988, VI.9.11.13-14, p. 343.

the self³, with the object seen, the ‘another’⁴, as if the seer «had become someone else (οἷον ἄλλος γενόμενος)»⁵ within and through himself, «but “beyond substance”»⁶:

But there will be a time when the vision will be continuous, since there will no longer be any hindrance by the body. But [...] seeing and that which has seen are not reason, but greater than reason and before reason and above reason, as is that which is seen. When therefore the seer sees himself, then when he sees, he will see himself as like this, or rather he will be in union with himself as like this and will be aware of himself as like this since he has become single and simple. But perhaps one should not say “will see”, but “was seen”, if one must speak of these as two, the seer and the seen, and not both as one – a bold statement. So then the seer does not see and does not distinguish and does not imagine two, but it is as if he had become someone else and he is not himself and does not count as his own there, but has come to belong to that and so is one, having joined, as it were, centre to centre. This also is how we now speak of “another”. For this reason the vision is hard to put into words. For how could one announce that as another when he did not see, there when he had the vision, another, but one with himself?

[...] Since, then, there were not two, but the seer himself was one with the seen (for it was not really seen, but united to him) [...]. He was one himself, with no distinction in himself either in relation to himself or to other things – for there was no movement in him and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent – but there was not even any reason or thought, and he himself was not there, if we must even say this; but he was as if carried away or possessed by a god, in a quiet solitude and a state of calm, not turning away anywhere in his being and not busy about himself, altogether at rest and having become a kind of rest⁷.

It is worth noting that, already in Plato, and in some specific contexts of his works, the contemplative ascent evoked an affective experience of divine

³ As is known, Plotinus is not consistent while referring to the self/I, although scholars agree on a distinction between the mobile self, the center of consciousness, and the human soul, the entirety of different capacities and levels of being: on this, see the important contribution of M. Stróżyński, *The Ascent of the Soul as Spiritual Exercise in Plotinus’ Enneads*, «Mnemosyne», 74, 2021, pp. 448-477; G. Aubry, *Metaphysics of Soul and Self in Plotinus*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, eds. P. Remes and S. Slaveva-Griffin, London 2014, pp. 310-322; P. Remes, *Plotinus on the Self. The Philosophy of the “We”*, Cambridge 2007; and E. R. Dodds, *Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, «The Journal of Roman Studies», 1960, 50, no. 1, pp. 1-7. In the quoted passage from the Enneads, the Greek text shows a vast array of words for the same concept of the self/I.

⁴ Particularly interesting for future developments of the concept of *ekstasis* is how Plotinus avoids referring explicitly to the union with the Good or the One, as we see in the quoted passage from the *Enneads*. This reticence has been observed by Z. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus’ Mysticism*, Leiden 2021, pp. 26-62.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads*, cit., VI.9.10.15-16, pp. 340-341. On the different moments of ascent and the apparently paradoxical self-reversion of the self before the ultimate goal of the union with God, which Plotinus seems, though somewhat ambiguously, to have distinguished from the first union of the self with the self, see Z. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus’ Mysticism*, cit., pp. 26-62.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, cit., VI.9.11.42, p. 345.

⁷ *Ibid.*, VI.9.10.1-11.16, pp. 339-343.

frenzy or erotic union⁸ – though not weakening the function of dianoetic and noetic human activity and not without ambiguities. This is particularly the case of the rather fundamental notion of ‘mania’ (μανία) and its relationship with the truth and true knowledge in his *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*⁹. Philo of Alexandria, likewise, engaged the vocabulary of visual experiences associating the mental operations for the apprehension of God with physical eyes. Combining Platonic tradition and Biblical exegesis, a number of his noetic accounts contain – though somewhat ambiguously – imageries of divine seizure, drunkenness, or inspiration, while addressing the epistemological issues of perceiving and knowing God¹⁰.

Yet, *ekstasis* receives a precise metaphysical and gnosiological role especially from Plotinus onwards. And it would keep that role, though altered in some ways, over the centuries, and recurrently in many different non-ultimately-dialectical metaphysical systems. Through ecstasy, our mind manages to cross its discursive nature and the structural reference to categorial being, getting in touch with what lies beyond the subject-object relationship. In such an experience, the very idea of knowledge is challenged, along with the notion of vision, the distinction between Being and its understanding, and the nature of the self.

Beginning with Neoplatonism, this understanding of *ekstasis* runs through all the late ancient and medieval philosophy from Islamic to Jewish and Christian thought. It is nonetheless true that in those theological traditions, ecstasy and vision come to be not speculative notions alone. They encounter the matter of fact of the many episodes of ecstatic rapture and vision told of in their respective sacred texts, and thereby endeavor to account for them based on philosophical models. This reference to particular episodes poses the very conditions within which these theories are shaped, and somehow contribute actively to giving birth to them. McGinn’s wide reconstruction appearing in this issue (*Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism*) sketches very clearly such an influence as for Christian thought, resulting also in the institution of the Latin expressions *extasis* or *excessus mentis*, as a calque (and an interpretation) of the Greek *ekstasis*:

⁸ See, for example, on Plato’s influence on Christian thought, A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, Oxford 2007.

⁹ On the vast literature on the argument, see, for example, F. Serranito, Μανία and ἀλήθεια in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, «The Classical Quarterly», 70, 2020, no. 1, pp. 101-118; P. Destrée and F.-G. Herrmann (eds.), *Plato and the Poets*, Leiden-Boston 2011; R. Barney, *Eros and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave*, «Ancient Philosophy», 28, 2008, no. 2, pp. 357-372. J. Moss, *What is Imitative Poetry and Why is It Bad?*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, Cambridge 2007, pp. 415-444; P. Murray, *Plato on Poetry. Ion; Republic 376e-389b; Republic 595-608b*, Cambridge-New York 1997; E. N. Tigerstedt, *Plato’s Idea of Poetical Inspiration*, Helsinki 1969.

¹⁰ See, for example, S. D. Mackie, *Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: Means, Methods, and Mysticism*, «Journal for the Study of Judaism», 43, 2012, pp. 147-179.

The Greek *ekstasis* does not appear in Classical Latin, but was taken over into Christian Latin (*ecstasis/extasis*) during the second and third centuries C.E., because it was used both in the LXX (e.g., Gen. 2:21) and the Greek New Testament (e.g., Acts 10:10, 22:17) to describe altered states of consciousness. In three Psalms (Pss. 30:23, 67:28, and 115:11) the LXX *ekstasis* is rendered in the Vulgate as *excessus mentis* (literally, a “going out”, or “departure”, of the mind). This is also the case with two other appearances of *ekstasis* (Acts 10:10 and 11:5) taken over by the Vulgate. Acts 11:5 is especially important because in it Peter, reporting his vision at Joppa, says: “I saw a vision in ecstasy” (*vidi in excessu mentis visionem*), thus bringing ecstatic states and supernatural visions together. *Ecstasis* and *excessus mentis* are synonyms in Christian mysticism, although some mystics sought to distinguish them¹¹.

Hence, also for these reasons, Christian philosophies are brought to confirm the strong conceptual link between ecstatic experience and intellectual vision, in which the *excessus mentis* is described as culminating even by the Bible. At the same time, it is worth noting that, although it is set out within the visual paradigm, the ecstatic experience, as it is inherited from Neoplatonism, does not necessarily coincide with a clear and immediate intellectual vision or knowledge of God’s essence. It is already the case of the eastern Christian thinkers and, particularly, of Pseudo-Dionysius, for whom the ultimate, non-discursive apprehension of God is bound up with the darkness (γνόφος) of the mystical unification with the invisible divine. In the first article of Section 1 of this issue (*Ecstasy and Vision of God: from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*), Ernesto Mainoldi (*Estasi e deificazione nella teologia mistica e gerarchica dionisiana*), shows accordingly how Pseudo-Dionysius posits the transcendent ascent in a supra-intellectual realm, sharpening the difference between experiencing and knowing God (a distinction that was to enjoy a wide reception in the whole of Scholastic thought, as pointed out by some of the articles in this issue).

Moreover, depending on contexts and paradigms, the original notion of *ekstasis* takes on divergent meanings, often after meeting further notions such as those of rapture, prophecy, sleep, dream, and death. So, over the late ancient and the medieval period, one would find almost as many theoretical combinations between different understandings of ecstasy and vision as the number of authors who put them forward. The overlapping between these various understandings of the ecstasy-vision relationship might be one of the reasons behind the effort of Patristic thought, and later of Scholastic theologians, to mold a more exact vocabulary and conceptual articulation. Indeed, the introduction of a specific lexicon about ecstasy and vision in Christian thought can be primarily acknowledged due to the influence of Paul of Tarsus, and, especially, of the multifaceted view of Augustine, who famously drew from Platonic and Neoplatonic thought quite systematically.

Catapano’s paper (*Estasi e visione in Agostino*) provides a thorough theoretical framework for Augustine’s spiritual ecstatic visions, assessing the

¹¹ B. McGinn, *Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism*, see below, pp.

experiences that Augustine reports having had in Milan and Ostia. As Catapano stresses, Augustine conceived of ecstasy as one higher form of vision, either imaginative or intellectual, involving in its production an active role of either the human spirit or the mind. However, the Augustinian *excessus mentis* is the disentanglement of the mind from the body and its bodily relationship with the exterior world, rather than estrangement from the mind and a transcendent abandonment of the intellect in God.

Yet, Greek Christian theology and, in particular, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* had an influence on medieval Latin mysticism outlasting that of Paul of Tarsus' and Augustine's theology. In particular, the Irish ninth-century scholar John Scottus Eriugena draws on Pseudo-Dionysius' works and Eastern Christian tradition for the concept of the ineffable nature of God and the divine 'Nothingness'. This is the premise for understanding Eriugena's radical apophatic thesis and the notion of theophany as appearances of God. As Valsecchi puts the issue in his essay (*Visions de Dieu, visions par Dieu: Théophanie et déification chez Jean Scot Érigène*), God, whose essence remains unknowable and invisible, shows and simultaneously sees himself throughout the created world and notably through the human mind, so that, in Eriugena's view, everything is a theophany, and a shift between subject and object of vision is required to really understand it.

As Barbara Faes de Mottoni has thoroughly argued in her studies, it is evident that medieval Christian philosophers are concerned about distinguishing the various kinds of relationships in which the divine, the human, and the angelic mind are involved both in life and in the afterlife, expressing this worry via the semantic tension within a range of various expressions¹². This is especially true for Christian Scholasticism in the Early and Late Middle Ages, where ecstasy is rethought keeping in mind especially the opposition between the *in via/in patria* condition, and in light of the decisive question of the function of the *lumen gloriae* in between beatific vision.

In this sense, Albert the Great precedes Thomas Aquinas in designating a whole list of epistemological phenomena different from ecstasy, which originates from love, such as contemplation, *raptus*, prophecy, and beatific vision. In her contribution to the present issue (*Estasi di Dio e rapimento dell'uomo nella teologia di Alberto Magno*), Rodolfi stresses that an additional difficulty is created by the distinctive significances the divine light acquires in Albert's works, variously combined with the normative definition of the *lumen gloriae*. In this context, love and light can be understood as two distinct notions, operating separately or jointly in those philosophers who engage with the categories of ecstasy, vision, and knowledge of God. Bonaventure, for example, has recourse to the love

¹² Among the numerous contributions of Barbara Faes to ecstasy, rapture, and prophecy, see B. Faes de Mottoni, *Figure e motivi della contemplazione nelle teologie medievali*, Firenze 2007; Id., *Excessus mentis, alienatio mentis, estasi, raptus nel Medioevo*, in *Per una storia del concetto di mente*, a cura di E. Canone, vol 1, Firenze 2005, pp. 167-184; Id., *Eventi sonori ed esperienze mistiche in alcuni itinerari teologici tardo-antichi e medievali*, «Musica e storia», 13, 2005, pp. 157-178; and Id., *Ispirazione, visione, rivelazione: note per un lessico della profezia nelle teologie della prima metà del secolo XIII*, «I castelli di Yale», 8, 2006, pp. 11-19.

vocabulary to distinguish the obscure (*in caligine*) knowledge of God during ecstasy – the highest form of knowledge in life – from the face-to-face vision of God in rapture.

Medieval debates also witnessed the increasing awareness about the distinction between natural and supernatural and, thus, between rational and superational, which already occurred in Augustine and famously is a mark of these centuries concerning, in particular, gnosiology. It is the case of Aquinas, who comes out with a different approach when outlining the relationship between the finite human being and the infinite being and essence of God, as Scribano has argued in her studies and stresses in the interview (*Storie e modelli di idee e visioni*) in the next section she had with us for this issue¹³.

Having defined the finitude of the human mind in its natural condition, Aquinas dislocates the human intuition of the divine to the supernatural beatific life. It should be noted that here intuition qualifies as a clear vision of God that is immediate, i.e., non-mediated by any other knowledge or idea, and counts as intellectual vision or knowledge of God's essence. Drawing on the Platonic and Aristotelian epistemological traditions, Aquinas discusses the faculties and conditions of finite minds, i.e., the human in this life, the angelic, and the blessed. In this regard, he attributes their different capacities by having recourse to a vast array of philosophical notions to distinguish them: knowledge, mediate vision, and immediate vision.

As might be expected, Christian ecstatic and visionary vocabulary further developed at the end of the fourteenth century. The contributions of Beccarisi (*Dio e Natura: Estasi come visione interiore nel pensiero di Meister Eckhart*), Riserbato («Tamquam speculum sine macula». *La visione in Dio secondo Guglielmo di Alnwick*), and Trottmann (*Union mystique et béatitude dans le De calculo de Ruusbroec*) closing Section 1 offer a vast, albeit incomplete, overview of these later debates in the high and late medieval period, from different doctrinal and regional points of view. In Beccarisi's reconstruction, Eckhart's 'speculative mysticism' consists of a constant dialogue between natural philosophy and theology, with particular attention for the episodes told in the Bible, and notably for Moses's vision of God in the *Exodus*. Effectively, for Eckhart the model of natural vision comes to be even the model for ecstatic vision, despite the *in via/in patria* distinction. Indeed, they both are visions, even though triggered by different means, i.e., the species and the *lumen gloriae*. This means that for Eckhart some knowledge of God's essence can be seized by the human intellect, thanks to the *lumen gloriae*, no matter whether in the afterlife or in this life.

By contrast, Alnwick reasons in terms of direct vision of the blessed souls in God, and asks himself whether or not the blessed can see, through God's essence, the infinity that God knows. As Riserbato remarks, Alnwick maintains that no created intellect can aspire to such an infinite view, and rather shows how created things shine in the divine essence as in a mirror. The dualism of

¹³ See E. Scribano, *Angeli e beati. Modelli di conoscenza da Tommaso a Spinoza*, Roma-Bari 2006.

in vialin patria also still remains a crucial doctrinal element in mystic authors like Ruusbroec, insightfully investigated by Trotman's paper. Trotman focuses specifically on Ruusbroec's *De calculo*, and here on the problem of the union with God in mystics in this life and saints in heaven, also paying attention to Jean Gerson's later censure. As Trotman underlines, Gerson was wrong in criticizing Ruusbroec's account showing instead the Christian specificity of the Flemish mystic and its continuity with the Cistercian and Franciscan mystical tradition. Ruusbroec's solution is that of a personal, contemplative union based on kenosis and God's love, which allows a deifying transformation of the blessed one's soul, bestowing on him access to God's super-essence via the created essence.

Before addressing the fortune of ecstasy in later periods, we should then consider that theories on the conditions of the encounter between God and the human mind extend far beyond the canon of authors of Western history of philosophy. The notions of vision and ecstasy were widely discussed within the intellectual cultures originating from theistic religions throughout history, including, of course, fruitful cross-pollinations¹⁴. An example in this volume is offered by the intersections between prophecy and angelic vision, as well as between truthful dream and interior vision, among the earliest and classic Sufi writers, as addressed in Leccese's article in Section 1 (*Visione ed estasi nel sufismo*). As we can read in Leccese's contribution, Sufi values, rearranged across centuries in different historical and geographical contexts, continued to have an extensive impact on Muslim intellectual life up to the twentieth century. In this context, with regard to the Islamic world, it is worth remembering that Plotinus' *Enneads* were already partially available centuries earlier than in Christian Europe. From the ninth century onwards, mainly under the name of Aristotle's *Theology* (*Uthūlūjiyā*), Plotinus' doctrines played a foundational role in the transmission and elaboration of Neoplatonism, contributing to the development of the theme of the union between the human soul and the intelligible dimension, which would remain vital and pervasive in all Islamic philosophy¹⁵.

Equally important is the thirteenth-century emergence of a new tradition within Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah, especially in Spain and southern France. To explain both the experience and knowledge of God, Jewish Kabbalists came up with various theories, as well as strategies and new taxonomies, which Renaissance

¹⁴ For a discussion on the intersections between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity on mystical union, see M. Idel and B. McGinn (eds.), *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: an Ecumenical Dialogue*, New York-London 1989.

¹⁵ See, for example, C. D'Ancona, *The Theology Attributed to Aristotle: Sources, Structure, Influence*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. K. El-Rouayheb and S. Schmidtke, New York 2017, pp. 9-29; Ead., *La Teologia neoplatonica di 'Aristotele' e gli inizi della filosofia arabo-musulmana*, in *Entre Orient et Occident: La philosophie et la science gréco-romaines dans le monde arabe*, eds. R. Goulet and U. Rudolph. Vandœuvres, Geneva 2011, pp. 135-190; and F. W. Zimmermann, *The Origins of the So-Called Theology of Aristotle*, in *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts*, eds. J. Krayer, W. F. Ryan, and C. B. Schmitt, London 1986, 110-240.

and early modern Christian thinkers later appropriated¹⁶. Consider, for instance, the fortune of דבקות (*devekut*) or mystical union and the transmutation of Enoch into the angel Metatron that Moshe Idel has recognized as mystical values commonly accepted in Jewish esoterica, though envisaged in different ways¹⁷. As in Judaism, a shift in Christian mysticism originated in the thirteenth century. Stimulated by new religious communities, such as Franciscans and Beguines, a new literary ecstatic output was promoted in vernacular languages. This new period in Christian theology was what McGinn has labeled as 'New Mysticism'¹⁸.

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christian Europe, a new revival of Platonism and Neoplatonism, largely thanks to the first Latin translations of all Plato's dialogues and Plotinus' *Enneads* published respectively in 1484 and 1492 by Marsilio Ficino, placed new emphasis on the issues of ecstasy and intellectual vision¹⁹. The debates in the early modern period also echoed a general religious crisis and the simultaneous arising of religious controversies. Yet, many of the old issues crowding medieval debates on beatific vision are still there, ready to be rethought according to new philosophical and theological needs²⁰. Tracking continuities and disruptions between medieval and early modern conceptualizations of the notions of ecstasy and vision is the core of Section 2 (*The Middle Ages beyond the Middle Ages*).

McGinn's paper opens the section by looking at the entire span of the intellectual developments in historic Christian mysticism, from its origins to its end around the seventeenth century. In his contribution, McGinn emphasizes

¹⁶ For an overview of the Christian *cabala*, see B. McGinn, *Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought*, in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, ed. R. H. Popkin and G. M. Weiner, Dordrecht 1994, pp. 11-34; W. Schmidt-Biggemann (ed.), *Christliche Kabbala*, Ostfildern 2003; M. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy. 1280-1510: A Survey*, New Haven-London 2011, pp. 227-235.

¹⁷ Among the numerous contributions of Moshe Idel to the field, see M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven-London 1988; Id., *Studies in Ecstatic Kaballah*, Albany 1988; Id., *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven 2002; and Id., *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven-London 2005.

¹⁸ See B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, New York 1998 and Id., *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)*, New York 2013.

¹⁹ In the vast literature on this topic, for an overview, see E. Baldini (ed.), *Platonismo, neoplatonismo, ermetismo fra umanesimo e controriforma: atti della XI giornata Luigi Firpo, convegno in onore di Cesare Vasoli (Torino, 28-29 ottobre 2004)*, Firenze 2012; J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leiden-New York 1989; S. Gentile (ed.), *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, Firenze 1984; C. Vasoli, *Filosofia e religione nella cultura del Rinascimento*, Napoli 1988.

²⁰ In particular, on the echoes of religious controversies on philosophical debates, see M. Priarolo and E. Scribano (eds.), *Le ragioni degli altri. Dissidenza religiosa e filosofia nell'età moderna*, Venezia 2017; M. Biagioni and L. Felici, *La riforma radicale nell'Europa del Cinquecento*, Bari-Roma 2012; and C. Vasoli, *The Crisis of Late Humanism and Expectations of Reform in Italy at the End of the Fifteenth and Beginning of the Sixteenth Centuries*, in *History of Theology*, ed. G. D'Onofrio, Collegeville 1996, pp. 371-457.

how medieval association between ecstasy, vision, and beatific knowledge stimulated significant debates that had long-lasting effects on the early modern period. The following articles of Toussaint (*Nell'occhio del gatto: l'oculus catti tra Alberto Magno e Marsilio Ficino*) and Braeckman (*La liberté de la volonté dans la vision béatifique: Suárez critique d'Ockham*), as well as the mentioned interview with Scribano, offer a deepening investigation of crucial changes that the human access to God undergoes – if compared to medieval philosophy – in three different stages of the history of European philosophy, i.e., Renaissance Neoplatonism, late Scholasticism, and the 'new' seventeenth-century philosophy. In these contexts, a priority seems to be given to the notion of intellectual vision, not necessarily agreeing with that of mystical ecstasy.

Just to touch on elements stemming from these papers, one might recall that, in fifteenth-century Italy, ecstasy and vision of God are often reconceptualized in order to indicate that specific phenomenon in which the inner vision, of one's own self, by a naturally divine-human intellect, precedes and founds the vision of God. One example that illustrates this reconceptualization is Marsilio Ficino's preface to his *Theologia platonica* (1482), and the significance he attributed to the maxim included therein of 'know yourself' (*nosce te ipsum*). This is the premise for reading Toussaint's article, who claims that Ficino gave new significance to the medieval notion of intellectual vision, concentrating on a peculiar zoological metaphor, the image of the cat's eye. As Toussaint stresses, although its theological use as synonym for the diaphanous nature of the human intellect should be traced back to Albert the Great, Ficino attributed a new metaphysical and aesthetic significance to the image of the *oculus catti*.

Evidence of re-assessments of the medieval accounts of beatific vision can be found in late Scholasticism, which also in this respect shows the influence of Counter-Reformed culture. In Braeckman's reconstruction, we see Suárez grappling with Ockham's account of the relationship between the essential freedom of the blessed one's will and the impeccability of the blessed. Unlike Ockham, Suárez rejects the thesis of the freedom of the will in beatific vision. He rather subscribes to the idea that no rejection is possible for any subject to whom the *visio Dei* has been offered. The will has no reason and no way to reject or dislike him. Accordingly, each vision of God is necessarily a beatific vision, insofar as the object presented by the intellect to the will determines it towards love, enjoyment, and joy.

Later, when one comes to René Descartes, one still can find non-ecstatic accounts of knowing God aligned with epistemic transformations of the notion of vision or intuition. In her interview, Scribano provides a thorough examination of the various meanings that the notions of knowledge and vision of God acquired from Aquinas to Spinoza, exploring how the concept of vision relates to that of intuition. Reconstructing the history of these ideas, Scribano teases out the distinctive process of naturalization of the knowledge of the divine that Aquinas inaugurated in the thirteenth century and Descartes resumed, renovating it in the seventeenth century. By calling for a historically situated

view of these concepts, Scribano questions whether ecstasy – understood as a detachment from the self – might be a result of this philosophical attempt, which she labels as ‘secular’, to naturalize the knowledge that finite minds can gain about God.

Overall, as flagged by the section title, this group of contributions not only reflects substantive changes in the European ecstatic and visionary tradition, but also draw fascinating parallels between medieval sources and later reconceptualizations of the notions of vision and ecstasy.

In Section 3 (*Ecstasy, Vision, and Mysticism in the Early Modern Period*), the articles of Tyler (*St John of the Cross's Visions in the Night*), Duyck (*La disparition de l'extase mystique [fin xvie-xviii siècle]*), and Santa Maria (*Saints in Ecstasy. Discord and Meaning in Roman Images of Visionaries ca. 1590-1620*) explore mystical trends and distinctive mystical approaches to ecstasy and vision in Counter-Reformed countries that witnessed the so-called ‘mystical invasion’²¹ of mystical works in reaction to the Reformation. In seventeenth-century mysticism, writers tended to indicate ecstasy as an intellectual and private vision, in which the *visio* is placed primarily in the thinking subject’s interiority. They somehow attempted cautious investigations and formalizations of the concept of ecstasy, despite its progressive fall into disuse.

Tyler’s paper concentrates on St John of the Cross’s careful approach to the many cases of ecstasies and visions springing up in the Iberian sixteenth century. However, it also pays particular attention to John’s notion of ‘three nights’ and re-understands it in the light of a contemporary psycho-spiritual setting. In John’s notion of ‘night’, Tyler argues, we do not have our basic human anthropology excised or removed, but rather the whole human personhood is being subjected to a radical transformation. In turn, Duyck addresses the writings of Teresa of Avila and their French seventeenth-century re-readings, seeking to explain the gradual disappearance of the topic of ecstasy in the classical age. Duyck shows well how the reduction of mysticism to the model of the ‘intimate’ experience, aiming at a private union with God occurring in the ‘center’ of the soul only, has an ‘invisibilization’ of the ecstasy as one of its main corollaries. And how the establishment of a new ‘formality’ of ecstasy contributed to invalidating the very framework in which mystical ecstasy was practiced. Yet ecstasy remains especially as an aesthetic category, as stressed by the paper of Santa Maria, reading early modern paintings against treatises on sacred art as well as sermons on Christian devotion, also emphasizing the role of senses in the spiritual life depicted in those artworks. In Santa Maria’s reconstruction, the portrayal of ecstatic saints and formal elements that underscore sexuality are frequently employed but also condemned.

²¹ See B. McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500-1650)*, New York 2017; Id., *Mysticism in the Reformation (1500-1650)*, New York 2017; Id., *The Persistence of Mysticism in Catholic Europe: France, Italy, and Germany 1500-1675*, New York 2020.

One could guess that the history of the philosophical use of ecstasy and intellectual vision is something destined to come to an end with the collapse of dogmatic theology, the rise of Enlightenment, and the subsequent revolution of Criticism. Instead, these conceptualities also survive in nineteenth- and twentieth-century metaphysics.

In the German Idealistic context, they persist notably as resumptions of the ancient metaphysical model, often readapted for the attempt to overcome the rationalist classical paradigm criticized by Kant himself or to oppose Hegel's strictly negative and dialectical conception of philosophy. This way, ecstasy – now significantly dissociated from the act of vision – is still used to affirm the possible retrieval of a pre-categorical and transcendental notion of Being, and not rarely to argue for the possibility of going beyond the subject-object distinction as put by Kant.

It is no accident that, in nineteenth-century Germany, from the Jena Circle to the *Tübinger Stift*, the simultaneous fascination for Spinoza's pantheism, Jacob Böhme's mysticism, and Plotinus' metaphysics comes to be particularly relevant to understanding new philosophical systems and the reactions to Kant's critique of rationalism²². It is against this background that mystical speculations on the intellectual intuition in German Romanticism and Idealism should be understood.

In Section 4 (*Contemporary uses of ecstasy*), both the articles of Cusinato (*Estasi e «fame di essere». La risposta di Schelling al «colpo di pistola» di Hegel*) and Mauri (*La conoscenza estatica nelle Conferenze di Erlangen di F. W. J. Schelling*) emphasize the late Schelling's re-use of the notion of *Ekstase* (ecstasy), in particular as a substitute for the concept of intellectual intuition, and as a key-element to going beyond his early theosophical framework. Accordingly, they both show how crucial, for Schelling, the role ascribed to ecstasy comes to be in his late works, and notably in the *Erlanger Vorträge* (1820-1821). Here ecstasy is welcomed back as the basis for a new understanding of individuality and existence, that of the making as a person of the Self, as a particular moment of the union of the Absolute and the self, and so as an ultimate reply to Hegel's famous critiques against him.

And somehow, Butler's peculiar interpretation of Hegel's *ausser sich* (being outside of oneself) reconstructed by Surace's paper (*Corpi estatici. Judith Butler interprete dell'ausser sich hegeliano*) can be read as in critical continuity with this provocation by Schelling and his re-evaluation of the relationship between ecstasy and personhood. Unlike Schelling, Butler indeed sees Hegel's *ausser sich* as an ecstatic moment, and accordingly thinks of the body as something structurally outside of itself, turned towards the other being animated by desire.

²² On these topics, see, for example, the recent contributions of C. Muratori, *The First German Philosopher: The Mysticism of Jakob Böhme as Interpreted by Hegel*, Dordrecht 2016; E. Förster and Y. Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism*, New York 2012; B. Mojsisch and O. F. Summerell (eds.), *Platonismus im Idealismus*, München 2003.

However, as is well-known, Schelling's thought has exerted great influence on a number of irrationalist, anti-dialectical and vitalist philosophies growing over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and drawing on mythological and theological dimensions²³. This is one of the reasons why Schelling's re-understanding of ecstasy as a way toward a non-self-centered notion of individuality can be seen as one significant anticipation of some later themes, which develop later under the influence of Schopenhauer's critique of individuality and especially of Nietzsche's dionysiac philosophy of art²⁴.

Evidence of the role played by ecstasy in these syntheses can be found even in that part of Russian culture that – from the Symbolists to the *Bogoiskatel'stvo* (God-seeking) – rediscovered and reinterpreted Nietzsche's view of Christianity. Within this context, Maccioni (*L'estasi come «scioglimento dionisiaco dei vincoli del visibile». La creazione artistica in Pavel A. Florenskij*) traces the philosophical notions that Florenskij, one of the 'God-seekers', adopted by examining his connections with Nietzsche. In Florenskij's philosophy of art, the artist, especially the iconographer, is nothing but a mystic, ascending, as a dreamer, to the Apollonian vision of the intelligible realm during the artistic creation. In the wake of this line of thought, one can also mention Boi's remarks (*Estasi come arché. Il ruolo della conoscenza estatica nella metafisica di Giorgio Colli*) on the use of ecstasy by the contemporary Italian thinker Giorgio Colli. As Boi stresses, Colli's philosophy of expression and immediacy still employs the notion of ecstasy (or, more precisely, of 'ecstatic reason') as knowledge not subject to individuation, reprising pre-Socratic and Greek archaic models but also based upon a conception of the world as 'expression'.

One important change in the philosophical stance on ecstasy and vision is that implied by the emergence of new disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and psychology, and notably the rise of psychopathology, marking a progressive 'secularization' of mysticism, despite the persistence of different forms of Western-occultist paradigms fascinated with mystical discourses. Besides Freud, that is especially the case with Pierre Janet's famous volume *De l'angoisse à l'extase* (1926), which has exerted an indisputable influence on the reassessing of the phenomenon of mysticism under the categories of hysteria, neurosis, and obsession.

²³ K. Asadowski, *Schellings russische Gesprächspartner*, in *Deutsche und Deutschland aus russischer Sicht. 19. Jahrhundert. Von der Jahrhundertwende bis zu den Reformen Alexanders II*, hrsg. von L. Kopelew, München 1998, pp. 750-774; J. M. Wirth and P. Burke (eds.), *The Barbarian Principle. Merleau-Ponty, Schelling, and the Question of Nature*, Albany 2013; G. De Fazio, *Il chiasma tra Natura e trascendentale: «un'originaria duplicità». L'ecologia filosofica tra il sistema di Schelling e l'ontologia di M. Merleau-Ponty*, «Lo Sguardo: Rivista di Filosofia», 30, 2020, pp. 323-342; and T. Höhne, *Schelling in Russia (1805-1856). Dalla diffusione della filosofia della natura all'elaborazione di una filosofia positiva russa*, «Lo Sguardo: Rivista di Filosofia», 30, 2020, pp. 365-383.

²⁴ For example, see D. Vanden Auweele, *Exceeding Reason: Freedom and Religion in Schelling and Nietzsche*, Boston 2020; Id., *Schelling, Nietzsche and (Ir)rationalizing Religion*, «Lo Sguardo: Rivista di Filosofia», 30, 2020, pp. 285-304; and E. C. Corriero, *Vertigini della ragione. Schelling e Nietzsche*, Torino 2008.

The aftermath of such a reduction of ecstasy and vision to mental disturbance is described in this issue especially by the papers of Feneuil (*L'extase et son écho. Sur deux aspects de la théorie bergsonienne de la mystique*), on Bergson, and Capanni, on Leuba (*L'estasi in psicologia alle soglie del Novecento: Les tendances di James H. Leuba*). In fact, Janet's approach is welcomed not only by those who aim to explain mysticism by psychological categories but also by those – like, surprisingly, Bergson in his *Les Deux Sources* (1932) – who endeavored to reevaluate mysticism as the culminating moment of their philosophy.

As shown by Feneuil, Bergson does accept Janet's reading, effectively associating ecstasy with pathological phenomena. But, simultaneously, he also sees in it a 'negative' moment of 'incomplete' mysticism, entailing a 'destruction of the self' which is nevertheless the premise for true and complete mysticism as action. At the same time, in Feneuil's reading, Bergson understands mystic ecstasies as the remote foundation of philosophy, revealed by its constant echo resounding in us. Another fascinating case is, finally, that of the American psychologist Leuba, as described here by Capanni's essay. In Leuba's view, constantly in dialogue with authors such as James and Ribot, the ecstatic and visionary dimensions of religion were discarded either as privileged channels of immediate communication by God or pure pathological events. In his article, Capanni contextualizes and explores Leuba's approach to exceptional religious experiences, carefully represented as natural phenomena, based on the essential functions of feeling, willing, and thinking.

To finally sum up and to get some initial conclusions, ecstasy and visions are proved to be essentially philosophical and theological concepts that a vast array of intellectuals have engaged with almost everywhere and in every historical era. The reasons behind this constant attention are many, including the fact that they are undisputable phenomena of the human mind.

Yet, despite this psychological matter of fact, such conceptualities are claimed by philosophers and theologians to designate a theoretical possibility that is somehow unutterable by means of denotative language. Indeed, the notion of ecstasy – and hence the intellectual vision often associated with it – is connected in particular with the aim of conceptualizing a specific kind of knowledge, which goes beyond the subject-object opposition. In some cases, it is linked to a kind of relationship that, although passing through some kind of cognition or experience, ties up directly the subject of this experience with something else.

In this *Introduction*, we have tried – with the help of the articles contained in the present issue – to provide an overview of how systems over the entire history of Western thought have drawn on the notions of ecstasy and vision to define, re-establish, or delimit such a possibility, or to account by it for theological truths.

We trust that the papers in this volume of *Lo Sguardo* will prove impactful and provide broader perspectives on such a vast subject as ecstasy and vision, offering some illustrative examples of the tangled history of what these notions have pointed to through the centuries. While analyzing distinctive responses to the relationship between the human mind and the divine, from different methodological and historical perspectives, these articles show the somewhat unattainable ultimate nature of ecstasy and vision, and reconstruct intellectual transformations and exchanges, by tracing continuities and changes.

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