

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MELANCHOLY AND DEPRESSION

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Abstract Although from a medical point of view, melancholy and depression are indistinguishable, I will try to argue that, from a philosophical perspective, there is an important distinction between the two related affective states. Analyzing various philosophical, literary, poetical, psychiatric and musical works, such as Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Butler's *Characters* (1659), Goethe's *Werther* (1774), Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* (1800), Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata (1801), Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* (1857), Cotard's report on the *Hypochondriac Delirium* (1880), Kraepelin's *Textbook of Psychiatry* (1883), I will try to clarify the psychological ambiguity between melancholy and depression.

Keywords Melancholy, depression, anxiety, paranoia, idleness, death, immortality.

In a world without melancholy, nightingales would belch.

E. M. Cioran

1. Towards an Impossible Definition

Melancholy is notoriously difficult to define. According to Robert Burton, the author of the classical *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), it is almost always linked with sorrow ("An inseparable companion, 'The mother and daughter of melancholy, her epitome, symptom, and chief cause:' as Hippocrates hath it, they beget one another, and tread in a ring, for sorrow is both cause and symptom of this disease¹") and fear ("Fear ... invites the devil to come to us ..., and tyranniseth over our phantasy more than all other affections, especially in the dark²"). For Baudelaire, melancholy is a

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¹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, (Philadelphia: J. W. Moore, 1857), 162.

² Ibid., 164.

version of *spleen*: “–And long cortèges minus drum or tone/ Deploy morosely through my being: Hope/ The conquered, moans, and tyrant Anguish gloats –/In my bowed skull he fixed his black flag.³” Furthermore, one may say that the Heideggerian boredom is connected to melancholy: “We straightaway take ‘boring’ as meaning *wearisome*, *tedious*, which is not to say indifferent ... [T]hat which bores, which is boring, is *that which holds us in limbo and yet leaves us empty* (emphasis in the original text).⁴” The Romanian noun *urât*, which as an adjective means *ugly*, and which is a combination of *spleen*, *malaise*, *cafard*, antipathy, disgust and anxiety, may also designate melancholy.

At least three constituents are “palpable” in the structure of melancholy: the first one is anxiety, the (me)ontological affect that is directed both to being and the nothingness hidden in being. Connected to the first constituent is the nihilistic feeling of inner emptiness, which is perceptible in boredom and anxiety. Furthermore, melancholy and paranoia are also related (see **Section 2 and 3**). The last and most important component is the fact that melancholy aims at death (either as suicide, or as “death of the soul”) (see **Section 3**). From the start, we can see an inherent ambiguity in all the three terms which are linked to melancholy. Is melancholy fearful as anxiety? Does its emptiness draw us closer to nothingness and further from ourselves? And, again, what does “death of the soul” mean, a question which cannot be valid from a biological perspective? Moreover, what is the relationship between melancholy and depression? If from a psychiatric point of view, there can be no difference between these two, does the *cultural* distinction between melancholy and depression still work? (see **Section 4**). We hope to shed light on some of these matters.

2. Anxiety, Paranoia, Idleness

Great happiness tends to become anxious or melancholic. Our greatest joys are tainted by the anticipation of subsequent loss. “We rest – a dream has power to poison sleep;/ We rise—one wandering thought pollutes the day/.⁵” The greatest scarecrow, death, receives positive connotations once we catch a glimpse of the nightmarish essence of existence. According to Robert Burton, “[e]ven in the midst of all our mirth, jollity, and laughter, is sorrow and grief⁶”; “even in the midst of all

³ Charles Baudelaire, “Spleen (IV)”, in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 86-7.

⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Mutability”, in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112.

⁶ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 172.

our feasting and jollity ... there is grief and discontent⁷; “[e]ven in the midst of our mirth and jollity, there is some grudging, some complaint.⁸” We may possess an inherent flaw that cannot allow us to *continuously* enjoy bliss. Perhaps the taste of supreme “jollity” is related to boredom, and, paraphrasing Schopenhauer, boredom is even more hopeless and more toxic than pain and suffering.⁹

In Burton’s vision, melancholy brings along what we would now call paranoia. The reality of the melancholic is distorted by his perception: “... as he falsely imagineth, so he believeth; and as he conceiveth of it, so it must be, and it shall be, *contra gentes*, he will have it so ...¹⁰” Or, as Samuel Butler has put it in a fragment from his *Characters* (1659), “a melancholy man ... converses with nothing so much as his own Imagination, which being apt to misrepresent Things to him, makes him believe, that it is something else than it is.¹¹” Melancholy and paranoia may be extreme forms of *solipsism*: “There’s only me! My sorrows transcend the borders of the species!” The projective factor of paranoia isolates the melancholic subject, cutting him or her off from the immediate alterity. “If two talk together, discourse, whisper, jest, or tell a tale in general, he thinks presently they mean him, applies all to himself ... He thinks they laugh or point at him, or do it in disgrace of him, circumvent him, contemn him; every man looks at him, he is pale, red, sweats for fear and anger, lest somebody should observe him.¹²” The delusion of persecution leads to inward emptiness and a sense of *isolationism*: “[The Head of the melancholy man] is haunted, like a House, with evil Spirits and Apparitions, that terrify and fright him out of himself, till he stands empty and forsaken.¹³”

Emil Kraepelin links paranoia with melancholy/depression in his influential *Textbook of Psychiatry*, first published in 1883, and edited eight times during his lifetime. Here are some of the “imperative ideas” of the depressed patients: “the fear of having been pricked by a splinter and having to die of blood-poisoning ..., the idea of throwing people into water, the fear of having stolen bread or money..., of having committed all the crimes mentioned in the newspapers.¹⁴” One patient in particular “was tormented by the idea of having murdered people with his thoughts,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, Christopher Janaway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 339-340.

¹⁰ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 159.

¹¹ Samuel Butler, “A Melancholy Man”, in *The Nature of Melancholy. From Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. Jennifer Radden, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159.

¹² Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 237.

¹³ Butler, “A Melancholy Man”, 158.

¹⁴ Emil Kraepelin, “Manic-depressive Insanity”, *The Nature of Melancholy. From Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. Jennifer Radden, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262.

and of having been guilty of the death of King Ludwig.¹⁵ Perhaps the separating (solipsistic) dimension of melancholy is an aggravating factor of madness: the dark night of melancholy prepares the way for the fake but fabulous sunrise of psychosis. “Idleness of the mind is much worse than this of the body; wit without employment is a disease ...: the rust of the soul, a plague, a hell itself,” writes Burton, adding that “this body of ours, when it is idle, and knows not how to bestow itself, macerates and vexeth itself.¹⁶” Any kind of intellectual activity has an antidepressant effect and, as Blake has put it, “the busy bee has no time for sorrow.¹⁷” This Protestant mindset (“Let’s make labor camps for the idlers! Let’s cure sloth!”) seems to forget that melancholy (and even more depression) is a disease which paralyzes will and basic capability. Burton writes that “Israel murmured against Pharaoh in Egypt, he commanded his officers to double their task, and let them get straw themselves, and yet make their full number of bricks; for the sole cause why they mutiny, and are evil at ease, is, ‘they are idle’.¹⁸” One may wonder: is *Arbeit macht frei* a slogan of work therapy? Is it a variation of “you will know the Work and the Work shall set you free” (misquoting *John* 8:32)? After all, according to *Genesis* (3:17) “fallenness” and work are one and the same thing: “Cursed is the ground for your sake;/ In toil you shall eat of it/ All the days of your life.”

Why insomnia and hypersomnia (excessive sleep) are both symptoms of depression? While insomnia suggests that there is something disturbing in the “muddy waters” of the id, and can be a preliminary step to mental illness, hypersomnia indicates, in post-Schopenhauerian terms, that the will to death is more powerful than the will to life. “When you have insomnia, you’re never really asleep, and you’re never really awake.¹⁹” We venture to say it is the same with hypersomnia: sleep is no longer a healing and rejuvenating function, but an ordeal and an agony. With both insomnia and hypersomnia, the depressive person is cut off simultaneously from lucidity and repose, from self-awareness and oblivion. The one afflicted with depression did not choose his or her disease, as I can choose to be a “busy bee” and “employ my wit”. The “death without death” of depression, to echo Kierkegaard, is like crossing an immanent inferno or like experiencing damnation in a serotonin-free world devoid of gods or of devils. Again, the emptying and excruciating dimension of depression makes us conceive death in a more positive fashion: but maybe this is sheer optimism, because in the deeper circles of hell death as anesthesia may be replaced with the “infinite dying” of the agony.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, id.

¹⁶ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 153.

¹⁷ William Blake, *Collected Poems*, ed. W. B. Yeats, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 166.

¹⁸ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 153.

¹⁹ David Fincher (director), *Fight Club*, 1999, screenplay by Jim Uhls, based on the novel by Chuck Palahniuk.

3. Melancholy in the Realm of Dead Immortality

In Goethe's *Werther* (1774), melancholy is linked with its black sun, i.e., death. "I have passed a dreadful night or rather, let me say, a propitious one; for it has given me resolution, it has fixed my purpose. I am resolved to die."²⁰ For the absolute Eros the only qualitative continuation is the absolute of Thanatos: "Death is the Romanticizing principle of our life,²¹" as Novalis has put it. Werther's suicide letter anticipates Kurt Cobain's testamentary note: "It is better to burn than to fade away."²² This suicide note can be read in the following manner: it is better to explode as a traumatic memory than to fade away as a dusty bourgeois antique (former lovers become lifeless husbands). Werther goes on to say: "A thousand ideas, a thousand schemes, arose within my soul; till at length one last, fixed, final thought took possession of my heart. It was to die. I lay down to rest; and in the morning, in the quiet hour of awakening, the same determination was upon me. To die! It is not despair: it is conviction that I have filled up the measure of my sufferings, that I have reached my appointed term, and must sacrifice myself for thee."²³

As I have mentioned, melancholy gravitates around the inward sun of death: when life becomes empty, worthless, and excruciating, the melancholic discovers, like Epictetus, that the door of the burning house is open.²⁴ Suicide may be the *idée fixe* of the melancholic person: he or she may expect from death what the believer awaits from God. "Now I know when the final morning will be – when the Light will no longer frighten away the Night and love – when sleeping will be forever just one unsuspendable dream", writes Novalis, adding that "my secret heart stays true to the Night, and to creative Love, her daughter."²⁵ Eros and Thanatos are synonymous for the German poet: diurnal sobriety is no match for the sweetness of love-death. Novalis's melancholy may be a symptom of the "yearning for the end of the world. Everything changes its aspect, even the sun; everything ages, even disaster..."²⁶

²⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, trans. R. D. Boylan, (Boston: F. A. Nicolls & company, 1902), 112.

²¹ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 154.

²² Kurt Cobain, "Suicide Note" in Alex S. Edelstein 2013, *Total Propaganda. From Mass Culture to Popular Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 119.

²³ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 112-3.

²⁴ Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. W. A. Oldfather, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 163.

²⁵ Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, trans. Dick Higgins, (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1988), 19.

²⁶ E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Arcade, 2012), 117.

In Schopenhauer's view, if life were completely unbearable, death would gain a salutary value. If *to live* is basically *to suffer*, *to die* means *to end suffering*. What if we experienced, as Miss X, one of Jules Cotard's patients, who suffered from a delirium of negation, the *impossibility of death*? "Miss X... claims that she no longer has a brain, nerves, chest, stomach or intestines; the skin and bones of her disorganized body [*corps désorganisé*] are all she has left (these are her own expressions). This delirium of negation even extends to metaphysical ideas which were once the object of her firmest beliefs; she has no soul, God does not exist, neither does the devil. Miss X ... is nothing more than a disorganized body [*corps désorganisé*], does not need to eat to live, she cannot die a natural death, she will exist eternally unless she is burnt, fire being the only possible end for her.²⁷" What if death is the continuation of our sufferings, like in Baudelaire's poem, "Skeletons Digging": "Do you ... intend to show/ That in the pit we may not know/ The sleep we have been promised there; // Non-being will not keep its faith; / That even Death can tell a lie.²⁸" Maybe even hell has its basements: if an immanent hell can be used as a symbol for our secular world (i.e., "this world = hell"), it is not unconceivable that there may be inferior hells which bear no reference to the idea of heaven.

Maurice Blanchot, in a line of argumentation reminiscent of his thesis concerning the nihilism of being,²⁹ claimed that the "ambiguity of the negation is linked to the ambiguity of death. God is dead, which may signify this harder truth: death is not possible ... We do not die, it is true, but because of that we do not live either; we are dead while we are alive, we are essentially survivors. So, death ends our life, but it does not end our possibility of dying; it is real as an end to life and illusory as an end to death.³⁰" Death and God seem to belong to the same ontological category, not only because of the fact that *God* and *death of God* share a similar vibration. God mimics death (and not the other way around): death is the real

²⁷ Jules Cotard, "Du délire hypocondriaque dans une forme grave de la mélancolie anxieuse", in J. Cotard, M. Camuset, J. Séglas, *Du délire des négations aux idées d'énormité*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997), 19-20 (trans. mine).

²⁸ Baudelaire, "Skeletons Digging" in *The Flowers of Evil*, 191.

²⁹ See Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 149: "Until now we thought nihilism was tied to nothingness. How ill-considered this was: nihilism is tied to being. Nihilism is the impossibility of being done with it and of finding a way out even in that end that is nothingness. It says the impotence of nothingness, the false brilliance of its victories; it tells us that when we think nothingness we are still thinking being. Nothing ends, everything begins again; the other is still the same. Midnight is only a dissimulated noon, and the great Noon is the abyss of light from which we can never depart – even through death and the glorious suicide Nietzsche recommends to us. Nihilism thus tells us its final and rather grim truth: it tells of the impossibility of nihilism".

³⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 7-8.

limit of our existence, while God is the imaginary and idealized expression of our thirst for transcendence. While the Orthodox Christians hope that Christ “tramples down death by death”, God is nothing else than a spiritualized version of the biological brutality of death. Moreover, both God and death are hegemonic: their control and power are authoritative and supreme, and one cannot fight/argue with them. Besides, as many authors argue, if we didn’t fear death (our most basic anxiety), we wouldn’t need God at all (“life eternal” is nothing else but “death eternal”).

The patients with *melancholia simplex* (Krapelin’s definition) or *severe anxious melancholy* (Cotard’s version) are what we would nowadays call paranoid schizophrenics. The link between depressives and paranoids is, as we have mentioned, the parallel inflation of the ego and the “blindness” towards the other and the objective outside world. Moreover, the distinction between inside and outside fades away, a phenomenon observable in Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965): the ego becomes a haunted house, and the harassment of the defense mechanisms of the ego is personified by the ones who try to break in and rape the main character played by the young Catherine Deneuve. When there is no differentiation between inside and outside, phantasy becomes reality: the “Sleeps and [the] Wakings [of the melancholy man] are so much the same, that he knows not how to distinguish them, and many times when he dreams, he believes he is broad awake and sees Visions.”³¹

However, melancholy (and depression) must be distinguished from the nuclear phase of paranoia. The psychotic evolves towards a kind of magical megalomania (a sort of Ragle Gumm syndrome³²), while the melancholic becomes a disenchanting micromaniac, where personal worthlessness becomes the norm. The psychotic is leading actor-director in a cosmic movie, whereas the melancholic is mainly an extra in the slumber of perpetual hypersomnia, experiencing psychological starvation in a universe deprived of illusions and seductive denials.

4. Melancholy or Depression?

I think that the difference between depression and melancholy may be compared to the distinction between fear and anxiety. While fear has always a concrete object, anxiety is a sort of super-fear (“fear of fear of...”) which refers to (the nothingness of) being. In a similar manner, depression originates in a concrete loss (the famous

³¹ Butler, “A Melancholy Man,” 158.

³² See Philip K. Dick, *Time Out of Joint*, (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987), 119: “A paranoiac psychosis. Imagining that I’m the center of a vast effort by millions of men and women, involving billions of dollars and infinite work... a universe revolving around me. Every molecule acting with me in mind. An outward radiation of importance... to the stars. Ragle Gumm the object of the whole cosmic process, from the inception to final entropy. All matter and spirit, in order to wheel about me”.

Freudian association of depression with mourning), while melancholy refers to an ontological loss (the losing of myself or of my world). Rephrasing one of Julia Kristeva's statements, we might argue that "any loss entails the loss of my being – and of Being itself. The melancholic person is a radical, sullen atheist.³³" In the post-Nietzschean world view, this "sullen atheism" of the one who experienced the death of God may even refer to the death of ego or the death of the self: when God died, the inner God also became void.

Because of the fact that melancholy lacks the concreteness of depression, it is more aerial, more *gaya* and less definite. Depression *is* pain, but melancholy is a sort of beautiful sadness, that lets one breathe. It is confused with sadness on a regular basis. When Garbage sings that "it feels so good to feel so sad³⁴" or when Cioran argues that "if you ever have been sad without a reason, you were sad your whole life without knowing it,³⁵" the musicians and the philosopher refer to melancholy foremost. While melancholy is perversely enjoyable, depression has a funeral stench, that hides either mourning, or the putrefaction of my soul longing for annihilation.

There may be yet another way to grasp the distinction between depression and melancholy: that of music. Take for instance the *Andante grazioso* from Mozart piano sonata no. 11 in A major K. 331. It is a highly melancholic tune: melancholy has the kind of anti-gravitational sweetness which is not present in depressive states, when the "low and heavy sky weighs like a lid.³⁶" Now listen to the *Marche funébre* from Chopin's second piano sonata in B-flat Minor Op. 35. It is extremely depressive, a dissociative howl of mourning, burial and despondency. In the end, lend an ear to both the *Adagio sostenuto* and *Presto agitato* from Beethoven's "Moonlight sonata" in C Sharp Minor Op. 27 No. 2. The sonata is published one year after Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* (1800), reminding of the atmosphere of this poem. The *adagio* combines graceful melancholy with severe depression, the identity between Eros and Thanatos playing a prominent part. The *presto* is furious, reminding of the manic phase of bipolar disorder. Indeed, these are some of the most famous examples. Other instances of depression include Beethoven's "Funeral march" sonata, Grieg's *Aase's Death*, some of Chopin's *Nocturnes*. There are also innumerable samples of melancholy: Chopin's *Largo* from his third piano sonata, Schumann's *Träumerei*, Schubert's *Impromptus*, and in naming these I restrict myself only to the piano repertoire.

³³ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5.

³⁴ Garbage, "Only Happy When It Rains", on the album *Garbage*, 1995.

³⁵ Emil Cioran, *Amurgul gândurilor [Twilight of Thoughts]*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 151 (trans. mine).

³⁶ Baudelaire, "Spleen (IV)", in *The Flowers of Evil*, 149.

According to Cioran, “[t]here exists ... a clinical depression, upon which certain remedies occasionally have an effect; but there exists another kind, a melancholy underlying our very outbursts of gaiety and accompanying us everywhere, without leaving us alone for a single moment. And there is nothing that can rid us of this lethal omnipresence: the self forever confronting itself.³⁷” Coming back to the quote which I have used as a motto, I venture to say that in a world without melancholy and with depression only, nightingales do indeed belch after swallowing an overdose of Prozac.

³⁷ E. M. Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Arcade, 2012), 110.