Chapter 14

A History of Melancholia and Depression

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Introduction

In the terms *melancholia* and *depression* and their cognates, we have well over two millennia of the Western world’s ways of referring to a goodly number of different dejected states. At any particular time during these many centuries the term that was in common use might have denoted a disease or a troublesome condition of sufficient severity and duration to be conceived of as a clinical entity; or it might have referred to a symptom within a cluster of symptoms that were thought to constitute a disease; or it might have been used to indicate a mood or emotional state of some duration, perhaps troublesome, certainly unusual, and yet not pathological, not a disease; or it might have referred to a temperament or type of character, involving a certain emotional tone and disposition, and yet not pathological; or it might have meant merely a feeling state of relatively short duration, unhappy in tone, but hardly a disease. Clearly the various states so denoted were unusual mental states, but they ranged over a far wider spectrum than that covered by the term “disease.”

A caveat and circumscription of my topic, reiterated at the end, is here in order. In its 2,400 year history, “melancholia” has undergone many vicissitudes of meaning. In Greco-Roman antiquity it was often used quite broadly, to include states that we would probably deem “schizophrenic” or “schizophreniform” (see Simon’s chapter). Moreover, there have been authors who have stressed the disorders of reason, imagination, and judgement more than the *affective* aspect; in what is today often termed “psychotic depression”; and still others who emphasized its “negetative” and psychomotor signs and symptoms—just as can be found in cross-cultured psychiatry today. Still, there has been powerful historical continuity in the utilization of the terms which gives primacy to the *affective* disturbances of “melancholia” and “depression”—and, to a lesser extent “mania,” which has often been used to characterize psychotic states generally. *Thus, I shall be concerned to trace the history of “melancholia” and “depression” in conditions in which the affective disturbance is deemed central, though impaired judgment and the “vegetative signs” may be mentioned as well.*

As a mood, affect, or emotion, the experience of being melancholy or depressed has probably been as well known to our species as any of the many other human feeling states. The wide range of terms, and the emotional variations to which they have referred, have reflected matters at the very heart of being human: feeling down, blue, or unhappy, being dispirited, discouraged, disappointed, dejected, despondent, melancholy, sad, depressed, or despairing. We have here a range of states that surely touches something from the experience of just about everyone. At least, from the discouragement or dejection over material and interpersonal disappointments to the sadness or despondency over separation and loss, to be human is to know about such emotions. We recognize much among such affective experiences as being within the normal range, however unusual or unhappy. To be melancholic or to be depressed is not necessarily to be mentally ill or in a pathological state. It is only with the greater degrees of severity or the longer durations that such
affective states come to be viewed as pathological, and even then the affective state is usually accompanied by other symptoms before being so judged.

These latter conditions—the pathological states—constitute the focus of this chapter. It is a history of clinical disorders over the centuries.

Melancholia was the Latin transliteration of the Greek melancholia, which in ancient Greece usually meant a mental disorder involving prolonged fear and depression, that sometimes merely meant “biliousness,” and that, along with its cognates, in popular and medical speech was sometimes used “to denote crazy or nervous conduct.” This term, in turn, was derived from melaina chole, translated into Latin as atra bilis and into English as black bile. As one of the four humors in the humoral theory, the black bile was thought to be the crucial etiological factor in melancholia. Various other disorders were thought to be caused by the black bile, and they came to be referred to as melancholic diseases. The black bile was referred to as the melancholic humor. The temperament or character type given special status in the Aristotelian writings, and thought to be due to the black bile, was named the melancholic temperament.

The various forms of the term melancholia, taken with relatively little change from the Latin, began to appear in English writings in the fourteenth century. Terms such as melencolye, melancholi, melancolie, melancholy, and others with only slight variations in spelling, emerged as synonyms for melancholia, with this latter as the basic term in medical thought. Melancholie in the sixteenth century and melancholy by the beginning of the seventeenth century became common in English as equivalent terms to melancholia for naming the disease, as did nearly identical terms in other vernacular languages; and these terms were also frequently used to mean the black bile itself. With the Renaissance rehabilitation of Aristotelian melancholia as a character correlate of genius or being gifted rather than strictly an illness, melancholia, melancholie, and melancholy came to be popular terms as well. In addition to denoting the illness, they were often used for almost any state of sorrow, dejection, or despair, not to mention respected somberness and fashionable sadness. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries melancholia seems gradually to have become restricted once again to the disease, while melancholy remained both a synonym for melancholia and a popular term used with a breadth and diffuseness not unlike our use of the term depression today. Remarkably similar trends occurred in many of the other vernacular languages of Western Europe. Hence we are examining the popular, as well as the medical, literature.

The term depression is a relative latecomer to the terminology for dejected states. Devised originally from the Latin de (“down from”), premere (“to press”), and deprimere (“to press down”), and carrying the meanings from these Latin terms of pressing down, being pressed down, and being brought down in status or fortune, this term came into use with these meanings in English during the seventeenth century. In that same century there were occasional instances of it being used to mean “depression of spirits” or “dejection.” But it was during the eighteenth century that depression really began to find a place in discussions of melancholia, with Samuel Johnson having a prominent role in this emerging trend.3 In contexts more closely associated with medicine, Richard Blackmore in 1725 mentioned the possibility of “being depressed into deep Sadness and Melancholy, or elevated into Lunacy and Distraction.”4 Robert Whytt in 1764 associated “depression of mind” with low spirits, hypochondriasis, and melancholy.5 David Daniel Davis in 1806 translated, from the French of 1801, Philippe Pinel’s Treatise on Insanity, rendering “l’abattement” as “depression of spirits” and “habitude d’abattement et de consternation” as “habitual depression and anxiety.”6 John Haslam in 1808 referred to “those under the influence of the depressive passions.”7 Samuel Tuke in 1813 included under melancholia “all cases … in which the disorder is chiefly marked by depression of mind.”8

The nineteenth century saw an increasingly frequent use of depression and related terms in literary contexts to mean depression of spirits, melancholia, and melancholy; and the use of the same terms in medical contexts gradually increased. These latter uses were usually in descriptive accounts of melancholic disorders to denote affect or mood, rather than having yet acquired any sort of formal status as diagnostic terms. Wilhelm Griesinger around the mid-century introduced the term states of mental depression (Die psychischen Depressionzustande) as a synonym for melancholia (Melancholie), while using depression and its kin mainly to indicate affect or mood in the manner just mentioned.9 During the latter half of the nineteenth century the descriptive uses of depression to indicate affect became increasingly common, but the basic diagnostic term was still usually melancholia or melancholy. Much like Griesinger, Daniel Hack Tuke, in his