

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Aristotle and DSM on ‘Bipolar’ Melancholy: Symptoms, Medication,
Link to Creativity.**

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Abstract

That Aristotle connected excellence, creativity to (bipolar) melancholy is known. This article adds depth and detail by distilling from his work characteristics of hot and cold melancholy, placing them in pairs of opposites, and comparing them with the diagnostic criteria for bipolar disorder in DSM. The Greek warned against extreme mood. He named two examples of mythical persons who suffered the tragic consequences; Ajax' suicide and Hercules' manic destruction of his wife and children. More recent examples are Vincent van Gogh, who committed suicide and his brother Theo who attacked his wife and child, was interned and finally succumbed from the consequences of extreme mania.

Aristotle urged melancholics to temper their mood. For it was only from mild melancholy that sustained creativity could be expected. He advocated hellebore as medicine. His general ethical advice to strive towards the opposite extreme is especially relevant for melancholics. Aristotle's work on excellence and bipolar melancholy can inspire those confronted with bipolar disorder today to temper their mood. The examples of famous melancholics throughout the ages bring comfort and a sense of belonging.

The author, who is stabilized on lithium, holds up the example of the van Gogh family who, lacking the effective the medicine available today, communicated openly with each other about their disorder. With the new 20th century medication, perfected in our own time, it is from increased openness that the major advances in mental health are now to be expected.

Keywords: Bipolar melancholy, Aristotle, medication, Vincent van Gogh, Theo van Gogh, creativity

1. Aim and scope

In this article I aim to investigate the Aristotelian concept of melancholy in its relevance for mental health today. To this end I distill from the philosopher's work characteristics of both the high and low mood, and compare these to the criteria for bipolar disorder in DSM 5. I elaborate on Aristotle's warning to avoid extremes and temper mood to sustain creativity. His view on the use of medication and therapy for this end is described. The question is how these views compare to those of modern psychiatry.

The scope of this article is broad. It ranges from ancient Greece via 19th century France to 21st century USA. It compares texts from Aristotle and the Letters of Vincent van Gogh with quotes from modern psychiatrists.

On the other hand the scope is limited. As a philosopher, I cannot present results of empirical research or statistics. Neither is any attempt made to diagnose persons from days past. Figures from Greek myths and the brothers van Gogh are used only to illustrate concepts of creativity and melancholy/ bipolar disorder. Nor can the reader expect a statement on melancholy or bipolar disorder as such. All I can do is compare the ways in which mood disorder has been described through the ages.

The results of this article are tentative, produced by methods of philosophical interpretation and empathy. Their validity depends on the degree to which the reader finds them convincing. As a philosopher, plausibility is my modest aim.



Aristotle by Rembrandt²

2. Introduction to Aristotle

‘Through what cause do all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts turn out to be melancholics?’^{1 p. 143}

Aristotle (384 BCE - 322 BCE) was a Greek philosopher. His father was court physician to the king of Macedonia, the grandfather of Alexander the Great. Alexander became Aristotle’s pupil and later during his military campaigns he sent samples of biological interest to his former teacher. Unlike his own teacher Plato Aristotle was an empirically minded philosopher, a good observer with a focus on detail and a specific interest in health concerns.

In this article I examine Aristotle’s contribution to the advancement of mental health. The key word here is ‘melancholics’. This word appears in Aristotle’s ethic works but is specifically elaborated in *Problemata* xxx.1, often called ‘On Melancholy.’ An

adapted English version is to be found in *Bipolar Creativity through the Ages*,^{1 p.143 etc.}

I must note that the authenticity of this document has been questioned by experts in ancient Greek language. Philip van de Eijk³, expert in ancient Greek medicine, points out that the author of the document is unknown and probably not Aristotle. However he shows that its content corresponds quite well with the concept of melancholy in works that can be attributed to Aristotle. Through the ages however the insights concerning melancholy and excellence have been attributed to Aristotle, for instance by Seneca (4BCE-65 AD) and Ficino, (1433-1499)^{1 p.43, 47}

It seems, if we are to follow the discussion into our own age, (for instance articles of psychiatrists in medical journals), we might ‘go with the flow’ and treat Aristotle as the author of the essay ‘On Melancholy’ with its intriguing opening question concerning the relation between melancholy and eminence.

The word melancholy is in itself confusing. Today we associate melancholy with a mild, innocuous despondent mood, inspiring for poets and singers. For Aristotle the word had a wider and deeper meaning, referring to a serious, even tragic mood disorder, with both a despondent aspect and the opposite, mania. In today’s terms Aristotle’s melancholy is very similar to bipolar or manic depressive disorder. The renowned German psychiatrist Kraepelin saw

‘Die Melancholie’ as ‘ein Zustandsbild der manisch-depressiven Irresein’⁴.

Jamison⁵ points to the relation between the Aristotelian notion of melancholy and manic-depressive disorder. Akiskal⁶, Pies⁷ and Ghaemi⁸ argue that it is the link between excellence and bipolar melancholy that Aristotle seeks to investigate.

‘Symptoms’ of low and high mood mentioned by Aristotle

<u>Cold melaina cholè - depression</u>	<u>Hot melaina cholè - (hypo) mania</u>
Uninspired, vexed, out of tune, (athumia); eats his own feeling (thumon katedon)	Enthusiastic, inspired (manikos)
Tearful, despondent, sad without cause (dysthymia alogos)	Good humoured, (euthymia) cheerful, exalted
Feeling hated (by the gods)	Ecstatic (ekstatikos), divinely inspired (en-thousiasmos)
Pessimistic, despairing, desperate	Optimistic, hopeful,
Deliberates a great deal, but does not act	Decisive, impulsive, acts without deliberation
Slow, paralyzed (apopleksia)	Energetic, intense, not easily disrupted by others, obstinate
Slow speaker, lacking words, silent	Good speaker (rhetorikos), talkative (lalos, lalisteros), inclined to sing.
Sluggish, sleepy	Lively, energetic, can do without afternoon sleep, Agile, (eukinetos) graceful, slender, beautiful
Sluggish feeling	Sensitive, emotional, passionate, irritable
Sluggish thought, stupid, forgetful, confused (moroos)	Full of ideas (fantasmata), talented, brilliant, decisive
Searches out lonely places (heremias), avoids the path of men (paton anthroopoon aleieinoon)	Sociable, merciful, (philantropos), quickly touched, sensual, quick to fall in love, to kiss (erotikos)
Cowardly, anxious (fobos)	(Over)confident, brave (prothumos) not impressed by danger (apathos),
Inclined to hang, destroy himself.	Easily angered, furious, aggressive (sometimes) violent, mad (manikos). Possibly followed by total confusion and paralysis, (moroos, koma)

He localized greatness especially in the state of well-tempered melancholy, neither too hot nor too cold. Pies⁷ refers to Goldilocks, the fairy tale girl who stumbled across three bowls of porridge, which turned out to belong to a father bear, mother bear and little bear. Goldilocks preferred the little bowl with warm porridge to both the hot and the cold. And rightly so. The Goldilocks of Pies likes her melancholy neither too hot nor too cold, but just right 'eukraton', i.e., the right mixture, the right temperature. Creativity is for Aristotle the result of a swing between slightly cold and slightly warm melaina cholè; these concepts might be, approximately, translated as 'mild depression' and 'mild hypomania'. Aristotle warns against extreme melaina cholè which is either too hot or too cold. Ghaemi⁸ quotes Aristotle:

'If they are not careful, they can become extremely melancholic, which can result in suicide. However if their melancholy is tempered, they are men of genius.'

So how can this desirable state of well-tempered melancholy be reached? To answer this question it is first of all necessary to discover what melancholy entails. Aristotle is not the man for abstract terms but gave empirical specifications of the words he used.

How can states of hot/warm or freezing/cold melancholy be recognized? Scattered through various works of the philosopher a variety of characteristics can be distilled. These I have taken the liberty to order into a table of opposing characteristics. The sources of the entrances into this table are to be found in 'Bipolar Creativity through the Ages' ^{1 p. 18-19}

3. Aristotle and DSM 5⁹

To investigate today's relevance of Aristotle's characteristics I have compared them to DSM 5 criteria for (hypo) mania and depression. These criteria are very detailed, and include mixed states. This is important for diagnostic purposes. A well founded diagnosis based on DSM criteria, must include duration of the symptoms. This is necessary to lead to an adequate therapy for a living person. Diagnosing persons who are no longer alive, (or even only existed in myths), in DSM terms is hardly possible. Not only is the face to face contact with the 'patient' missing, there is also a cultural¹⁰ abyss between psychiatrist and 'patient'. Diagnosis is not the task of the philosopher. Aristotle names melancholics such as Ajax and Hercules to elucidate his concept of hot and cold melancholy. In the same way I describe the fate of Vincent and Theo van Gogh to show to which tragic extremes bipolar melancholy may lead if it cannot be tempered. With Aristotle I abstain from posthumous diagnosis. But with the help of his and comparable DSM criteria I do aim at emphatic understanding of bipolar creativity through the ages. My purpose allows me to simplify DSM criteria, leaving out details such as duration, and descriptions that are specific for 2021st century. For instance a criterion such as

'Clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other areas of functioning'

Is difficult to apply to a culture which knows neither clinics nor the idea of 'functioning': where it is not a function or occupation but a hereditary status that defines identity. On the other hand a modern reader will not appreciate what it meant to an ancient Greek to be en-thousiastic, or divinely inspired; or indeed the opposite, hated by the gods. However a good listener can emphatically

recognize expression of mood in another cultural environment. Having said this, it is worth trying to compare lists from 21st century psychiatry with those of an ancient Greek philosopher.

First I enumerate relevant criteria for what in DSM 5 is called bipolar disorder.

DSM 5 criteria for diagnosing bipolar disorder

Manic/hypomanic mood

Elevated, expansive, or irritable mood with increased activity or energy - Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity - Decreased need for sleep - Increased talkativeness - Racing thoughts - Distracted easily - Increase in goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation - Engaging in activities that hold the potential for painful consequences.

Depressed mood

Depressed mood - Loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities - Significant weight loss or decrease or increase in appetite - A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement - Fatigue or loss of energy - Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt - Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness - Recurrent thoughts of death, of suicide.

So how do Aristotle and DSM compare? I start with high mood, the hot melancholy or (hypo)mania.

On the hot side

DSM lists an elevated mood; Aristotle speaks of cheerfulness, and uses a Greek word *euthymia*. Eu = good, Thymos = mood. DSM notes grandiosity and an inflated sense of self. The hot melancholic is expansive, ex-static, has stepped out of his or her self.

Aristotle speaks of confidence and a sense of being divinely inspired, the *thuos* = god has entered into the soul, which is then enthusiastic.

DSM mentions decreased need for sleep, Aristotle specifies that the warm melancholic can do without the afternoon sleep, common practice in warm countries.

DSM lists racing thoughts. Aristotle observes that the warm melancholic is brim full of ideas (*fantasmata*).

DSM mentions talkativeness, Aristotle uses the word *lalos*, talkative, *lalisteros* very talkative.

On the cold side

DSM names depressed mood. Aristotle's cold melancholic is tearful, despondent and sad without cause (*dysthymia alogos* = an illogically un- mood).

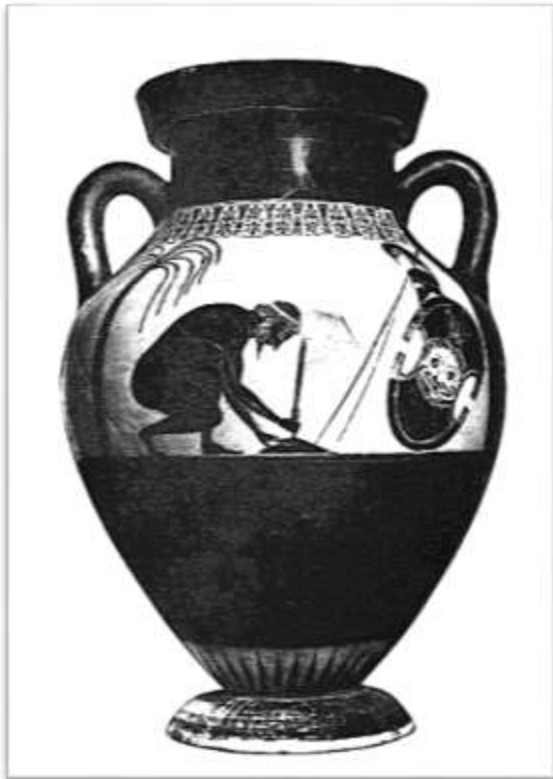
DSM characterizes depression by a sense of excessive guilt, worthlessness. Cold melancholics feel hated by the gods.

In DSM depression leads to slowing down of thought, a reduction of physical movement, and fatigue or loss of energy. Aristotle's cold melancholics are sluggish, sleepy. They speak slowly, are lacking words, even silent. DSM mentions recurrent thoughts of death, even a suicide attempt. Aristotle's very cold melancholic is inclined to hang, destroy himself.

DSM mentions impairment in social functioning. Aristotle also refers to the social relations of the melancholic. On the hot side he is sociable, merciful, (*philantropos*), sensual, quickly touched, to fall in love, to kiss (*erotikos*). The cold melancholic searches out lonely places (*heremias*) and avoids the path of men.

We can conclude that there is a very relevant overlap between DSM criteria and the characteristics of Aristotle. The philosopher's descriptions sometimes show a

small nuance of a difference. On the one hand he is more positive, racing thoughts are 'fantasmata' leading to excellence, creativity. On the other hand he formulates nasty extremes. He speaks in a straightforward way about suicide. The hot melancholic can be easily angered, furious, vicious, aggressive (sometimes) violent, mad (manikos), where DSM speaks of an irritable mood.



Ajax¹¹ preparing to thrust himself onto his own sword, firmly planted in the earth. With Aristotle we might fine-tune this statement. It was the sudden cooling of his melancholy unto a cold extreme that conquered Ajax.

4. Tragic extremes

It becomes clear that melancholy for Aristotle was not an innocuous sentiment but a serious mood disorder that could have a devastating outcome. He illustrates this by naming two tragic heroes. Ajax and Hercules.^{1 p. 143} These are mythical heroes, still renowned today for their strength, courage, strategic insight and (initial) success. Although these heroes are familiar, the awareness that their extraordinary performance was followed by tragedy has faded.

The Greek reader needed only the name Ajax to remember how he was driven by manic delusions, attacking a flock of sheep as if they were his enemy. Then his mood plummeted and he committed suicide by planting his sword into the ground and throwing himself upon it. As the Roman poet Ovid sums up his tragic fate:

‘No-one ever conquered Ajax except Ajax himself’¹²

Hercules also underwent a tragic but different fate. He too is named by Aristotle as an eminent melancholic. He was a revered mythical hero who performed many impossible tasks, slaying a variety of monsters. He was a liberator, freeing Greeks from the reign of terror. His highly successful life takes a turn when he visits the underworld, the dark gloomy abode of the dead, not as a spirit, but as a living human being. This was a literary metaphor for deep depression. When he emerged, he found his family threatened by the local monarch. He slew the tyrant, but subsequently slid into a manic delusion and murdered his wife and children.



Ercole saetta I figli ¹³

When he realized what he had done he was desperate.

‘Heracles: “Oh, children I who gave you life and breath have taken them from you again. No advantage did my noble deeds bring you, performed for your sakes, meant to build for you a life of repute, a noble inheritance from a father.

And you, poor wife, so patiently did you always care for home and hearth, how did I reward your loving goodness? – I killed you!

Oh I weep for my wife and my children, for myself!’ ^{1 p 37}

Such drama belongs in the theatre, not in real life. As a metaphor it is sadly relevant for

many families with an untreated bipolar disorder. Families have been torn apart by mania, or have had to guiltily face a suicidal loss.

There is however a way forward even for Hercules. His ‘therapeus’, ‘brother in arms’, who accompanied him on the journey through the depressive underworld, led him away to Athens. There he recovered, supposedly by taking hellebore. Later on in life, after many more heroic deeds, he became insane again, climbed onto a funerary pyre and burned himself to death.¹⁴ From there he was raised to the seat of the gods, to the starry heavens.

These stories of Ajax and Hercules are not empirical case studies in the modern sense. The ‘patients’ existed only in myth and in the theatre. Aristotle used the stories of their tragic fate to support his theory that, even in men of great power and talent, melancholy can lead to devastating extremes; aggressive mania or deep depression leading

to suicide. He used these examples to warn eminent melancholics, that tempering their mood is of major importance, both to free their creative talents and to avoid disaster.



Frères by Zadkine¹⁷

The bronze by Zadkine¹⁷ shows the brothers supporting each other in their suffering.

The bronze by Frans van der Ven¹⁵, on the right, shows the 'high' creative mood of the brothers, with Theo on the right and Vincent on the left.

The child is the future holding a sunflower their gift to humanity. The bronze by Zadkine on the next page shows the brothers supporting each other in their suffering.

5. Melancholy in the van Gogh family ¹ p.56 15

Where did we see these extremes of melancholy again? The obvious example of a very creative person who committed suicide is Vincent van Gogh. Today he counts as a bipolar icon. World Bipolar Day is celebrated on 30th March, the artist's birthday. The letters between the van Gogh siblings, in which they discuss their melancholy, show how Vincent moved toward suicide. This is confirmed by Theo's letter to a sister after the event.

'He himself longed for death; when I sat by him and said to him, that we would try to heal him and that we hoped that he would be saved from this despair, he said:

'La tristesse durera toujours'
(the sadness will last forever)

I knew what he meant.'



Brothers, Frères, Broers¹⁶

Theo knew about melancholy from first-hand experience. His history shows the other extreme. Half a year after Vincent's death Theo experienced an extreme episode of mania. He attacked his wife and child as Hercules had done. He was transported from

Paris to a clinic in the Netherlands, the Willem Arntsz Huis. This institution for the care of the mentally sick, established in Utrecht in 1461, is still a centre for acute psychiatry today. I quote from their medical case report.

‘After having travelled the whole night he was very cheerful; confused, has no idea of time and place, utters only disjointed words. Suffers from megalomania. The patient is genetically burdened, has had a life full of emotional turmoil and great effort. The patient who hardly slept, has been active all day, cheerful, noisy, tearing up his clothes, banging his head against the walls, everywhere.’¹⁷

On 25 January 1891, less than half a year after his brother, Theo died from heart failure following exhaustion from continuing extreme mania.

6. Dr Gachet, van Gogh’s therapist

The brothers wrote to each other and very often mentioned ‘melancholy’ The word is found in 121 letters or documents.¹⁶ They chose Dr Gachet and Auvers for Vincent after he left the institution at St Remy. Gachet was the expert in the field. He had written a doctorate thesis called *l’Étude sur la Melancholie*.¹⁸ Of course Vincent painted Gachet, who also suffered from melancholy. As Vincent wrote to Theo:¹⁶

‘He certainly appears to me as ill and confused as you or I.’



Dr. Gachet¹⁹ by van Gogh

Vincent paints him in the ‘melancholy pose’ Before him digitalis, foxglove perhaps a medicine against melancholy-mania?

In his doctorate thesis *l’Étude sur la Melancholie* he listed several creative melancholics, as Aristotle had done before him. Gachet includes Aristotle in his list. And Rembrandt. So the image at the beginning of this article can be seen as a painting of one creative melancholic by another.

The van Gogh brothers made fun of the notion of creative melancholics.

‘The doctors tell us that not only Moses, Mohammed, Christ, Luther etc. were mad, but also Rembrandt, and all the narrow-minded old women like our mum.

One could then ask the doctors: where are the rational people?

Managing the brothels probably!

So what shall we choose?

Luckily we don’t have to choose. ’

Indeed they had no choice, the brilliant Artist and his highly gifted Maecenas brother were

fated to join the ranks of eminent melancholics.

7. Aristotle on therapy

So now back to one of the gifted melancholics also mentioned by Gaget: Aristotle.

In his book *Metaphysics* the Greek philosopher comments on tragic melancholics.

‘If there is truth in what the poets say, that the gods are by nature jealous, then all outstanding people are fated to be unhappy’.²⁰

Having said this, Aristotle, in his typical way, counters this view with his own. The cause of the suffering of outstanding persons is not due to a trick of jealous Gods. It lies in the nature, the physical constitution of eminent melancholics to go to extremes. If so they should be able to avoid disaster by tempering their mood. Aristotle not only reflected on the nature of melancholy, but also had in a variety of works, practical recommendations for treatment,

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, **melancholics** have four ‘hits’. Unfortunately translators generally beat about the bush when confronted with this word **μελαγχολικοί**. They do not translate the word directly but in a round-about way as ‘excitable’, or ‘impulsive’. Expert in Greek medicine Philip van der Eijk³ does not follow them, for by avoiding the literal translation of the word ‘**melancholics**’ they miss the medical relevance of what Aristotle has to say. This son of a royal physician argues, in this so often incorrectly translated passage, that melancholy is due to a natural constitution, This is conform the passage in ‘On Melancholy’.^{1 p 147}

‘This is why outstanding persons are melancholics, not owing to some (externally induced) illness, (dianosis) but due to their natural constitution (dia physin).’

This implies that medication on a continuous basis is extremely important for melancholics.

‘Due to their natural constitution melancholics need perpetual medicine. Because their temperament keeps their bodies in a constant state of irritation. And their desires are continually active. And any pleasure, if strong, drives out pain...this is why they can become undisciplined and vicious.’²¹

Aristotle points to the urge this painful disorder creates for any pleasure to drive out the pain. This is today called self-medication, which can lead to overweight, alcoholism or drug addiction or indeed vicious behaviour. Aristotle adds a reservation about the effectiveness of medication. It works for hot melancholy but not so well for cold melancholy.

‘Cure is easier with the excitable melancholics than with those who deliberate endlessly what they ought to do but don’t do it.’

For medication, Aristotle specifically refers to Hellebore^{22 p. V.ix15}.

Hellebore was famous in antiquity as an expeller of melancholy, especially its manic extremes. Burton²² describes how the effect of this plant was supposedly discovered in Ancient Greece by a shepherd boy. He saw his furious goats calming down after eating it. The boy successfully applied the formula to

the manic daughters of the king of Arcadia, who were calmed by drinking his goat's milk. There is a striking similarity to the discovery of the mood stabilizing effects of lithium by Cade²³ in the 20th century. He noticed, by chance, that lithium carbonate tended to calm guinea pigs. He could turn them on their backs, and the normally active rodents would gaze placidly back at him.

The word 'helleboros' is a compilation of 'helein' (to injure) and 'borá' (food), indicating that the plant could be both poisonous and healing, depending on the dose. This herb was to be taken in doses carefully weighed by specialists, the 'pharmakoi' or poison mixers. Incidentally, hellebore and lithium both have small therapeutic windows. The Greek seaside town of Anticyra, where hellebore grew abundantly, became a popular centre for the treatment of melancholy and madness. The city's name is supposedly derived from 'Anticyreos', who is said to have cured Hercules of his mania. So famous was this Greek resort for melancholics, that even in the 17th century, long after it had fallen into ruin, one could still say of a disagreeable person, as the English playwright Ben Johnson did ;²⁴

'this fool should have been sent to Anticyra, the isle of Ellebore, there to be purged'.

In modern psychiatry, continuous medication is also considered essential for bipolar disorder. Goodwin and Jamison²⁵ stress the need for careful doses, because of the potential poisonous character of lithium, and so as not to hamper creativity. They give an overview of research results on the effects of lithium on creativity. They conclude that, in the great majority of cases,

'Lithium does not hamper even the subjective sense of being creative. On the contrary, with long term medication, the cyclical pattern becomes calmer, without disappearing completely, thus lengthening periods of creativity quite substantially. This does of course require a regular dose which should be as low as possible, especially where there is talent to nurse, a cherished capacity which could be suffocated if light mood swings were suppressed'.

For Aristotle medication was important but not sufficient. He advocated additional therapy. The Greek verb 'therapeuo' has a broad meaning: 'to nurse' and 'to take care of', but also 'to educate or train'. A 'therapeus' is a 'brother in arms', a friend who accompanies one through life's battles. The therapeus was to give practical advice, rousing and inspiring, or warning for impending danger as circumstances demanded. Goodwin and Jamison suggest that a relationship of trust between of a psychiatrist and a creative patient can grow only if the therapist pays attention to the positive side of the disorder.

The therapy Aristotle advocates is to aim at avoiding the extremes. In his Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle explains the idea behind this therapy; reaching the golden, healthy mean.

'Virtue is then the observance of the mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect.'

Aristotle has some practical advice on how to avoid devastating extremes. At the moment that our mood is too hot/high or too cold/ low:

'we must drag ourselves away in the

opposite direction, for by keeping away from the immediate extreme, we will land somewhere in the middle’.

A table by Aristotle in his *Eudemian Ethics*²⁶ lists extreme types of mood and action, with the mean in the middle.

Aristotle’s table of behavioral extremes and the ethic mean

Vice - deficit - too little	Virtue - the mean	Vice - excess - too much
Lack of appetite	Temperate	Self-indulgent
Scared, cowardly	Confident, Courageous,	Reckless, Rash
Without passion, somber	Good tempered, Amiable	Irascible, Hot tempered
Stingy	Liberal, munificent	Prodigal
Unduly humble, Shy – too much respect	Respectful, Honorable, modest	Unduly Proud, disrespectful
Boring, critic, I contributes nothing to conversation,	Witty Tactful	Vulgar, Buffoon Tactless, Indecent

Aristotle gives explanations of the pairs of bipolar vices. For instance:

‘A foolhardy man is one who does not fear things he should fear; a cowardly man is one who fears things he should not.’

‘A vain man is one who rates himself too high and a diffident man is one who rates himself too low.’

‘A prodigal man is one, who goes to excess in every kind of expenditure, and an illiberal man is one who never spends enough.’

‘An insensible man is one who lacks desire even for things that are most natural and would be better for him and is void of feeling as a stone. An intemperate man is one who desires

what he should not and goes in excess in every possible way; ‘

8. Aristotle and DSM on creativity

With medication and such contra behavior Aristotle hopes to temper melancholy mood. For only then is there room for lasting creativity.

‘Those in whom excessive heat is tempered are melancholic, but cleverer and less eccentric and in many respects superior to others either in mental accomplishments or in the arts or in public life.’¹

Creativity is to be found especially in the tempered warm melancholy, an equivalent to what is currently called ‘hypomania’. In those who have tempered their melancholy

the mind is exceptionally active, but not disastrously over-active.

‘Due to the susceptibility and liveliness of their minds, they have a myriad of associations and ideas.’²⁷

Melancholics in a tempered mood are creative and rather unpredictable since they cannot and will not create on demand. The associative but focussed thinking, stimulated by warm, but not hot, melancholy, may be the essence of creative excellence.

This is corroborated by Jamison.⁴ Manic patients tend to exhibit pronounced associative thinking. In their mind ideas and images merge in an incongruous manner which leads to the creation of new combinations.

Frances and First²⁸ also see a connection between achievement and hypomania.

‘During hypomanic periods achievements can suddenly increase and projects and tasks that were long neglected can be completed with great speed. A strongly heightened level of activity is translated into increased productivity in your work, study or in the home, without leading to fatigue or with the agitation which often accompanies mania.’

No exceptional achievements can be expected from an aggressive, raging Heracles, a deeply depressed Ajax, a manic Theo or a deeply depressed Vincent. During their milder highs however they were extraordinary. Reference to these tragic heroes makes it clear that it is only well tempered melancholy that can lead talent to sustainable excellence.

That mood must be tempered for outstanding performance still holds. In DSM 5^{10 p. 136} we read:

"There may be heightened levels of creativity in some individuals with a bipolar disorder. However...greater lifetime creative accomplishments have been associated with milder forms of bipolar disorder. "

The question with which Aristotle begins his essay:

‘Through what cause do all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts turn out to be melancholics?’

Is answered in the conclusion:

‘It is possible for an abnormal mixture of bodily fluids to be well tempered and in a favorable condition’, that is, warmer or cooler as the situation demands. This is why outstanding persons are all melancholics, not due to a passing illness, but due to their natural constitution.’

An interesting thought here is that the well-tempered mean is not static but depends on what the situation demands. Sometimes courage is needed, at other times caution. In some situations one must be liberal, in others it is more adequate to be stingy. Flexibility is an important aspect of bipolar creativity. Aristotle’s conclusion that ALL outstanding persons are melancholic does not hold in our day of statistics and equality. Aristotle talked about the small exclusive class he belonged to, that of aristocratic men and mythical heroes. Slaves and woman fell outside his scope, although he does mention female soothsayers. Given the cultural differences however, the relevance of Aristotle’s insights for today is amazing.

9. Conclusion- advances in mental health

Aristotle’s concept of melancholy reflects the modern bipolar spectrum. The characteristics

he describes of cold and hot melancholy are in line with DSM 5 criteria for bipolar disorder. Apart from details and cultural differences, his treatment recommendations are strikingly close to modern pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy. He stressed the importance of medication to reach a well-balanced mood and of explicit behavioral attempts to avoid extremes. Only thus can the expression of talents be sustained. He focused on a small group of gifted upper class men, but Aristotle's advices on medication and therapy are relevant for all who suffer from bipolar disorder today.

Aristotle and Gachet had hellebore and digitalis available to temper mania. Effective medication for depression came only as late as 1950's. For lithium, that can temper mood in both directions, Europe had to wait until the discoveries of Cade were acknowledged in the 1970's due to the work of the Dane Morgan Schouw.²⁹ Both types of medication offered major advances in mental health. Since then there have been continual incremental improvements.

A major advance in the past two decades has been the increased awareness and acceptance of bipolar disorder. This is essential. Without it people may not recognize or can easily disregard symptoms that call for diagnosis and therapy. Lack of knowledge and acceptance makes it difficult for the people surrounding someone with a bipolar disorder to coach and advise effectively. This may have disastrous effects, for more and less creative persons alike. The disorder has an inbuilt antagonism against diagnosis and treatment, especially in the high mood. Then the person will be so self-confident that he cannot be convinced that he has a problem.

Looking back to famous persons with bipolar melancholy or disorder is encouraging. Neither Ajax nor Hercules lost respect because of their extreme, destructive

moods. The Greeks made it clear that they deserved no blame. Vincent van Gogh has become the bipolar icon. Theo with his tragic manic end has remained in the shadow, but he is now creeping into the light. Quite amazing is how openly the van Gogh siblings communicated with each other about their melancholy. An example for 21st century families.

With the increased interest for bipolar creativity through the ages in the past two decades a 'coming out' of and by persons undergoing a bipolar disorder today has taken place. This dual approach was initiated by Kay Redfield Jamison, who knows the disorder from the inside, and the outside, as a patient and professor of mood disorder and psychiatry. She continued the tradition of Aristotle and Gachet in listing famous melancholics/bipolars. Her list is much longer. In *Touched with Fire*⁴ appendix B she lists some 200 famous bipolars. Similar lists of famous 'bipolars' are now all over internet.

I use the term 'bipolars' explicitly. Psychiatrists do not allow themselves this term, they feel it implies a stigma, and respectfully stress that a 'patient' is so much more than the disorder he or she suffers from. With other 'fate mates' I share a different view. Calling ourselves and each other 'bipolars' shows that we have accepted this fate as our own, for better and for worse. That it is an essential part of who we are, even when we are stabilized, even when the 'disorder' has faded into the background.

As formulated by the Frenchman Renaud Maigne, chairman of Bipolarité France³⁰:

'La maladie est pleinement encrée en soi. Un bipolaire doit être entier et s'accepter tel qu'il est. C'est choisir la vie !'

'The disorder is engraved in our soul. A bipolar must be whole and accept

him- or herself as he or she is. That is choosing for life!

This increasing acceptance of and openness about this two faced disturbance, with its great potential and great danger, leads to a true advancement in mental health. As long we are ashamed to speak about it, as long as bipolar disorder remains a taboo, those who suffer from it will remain vulnerable to the tragedy that can ensue from belated diagnosis.

It is here that general practitioners have an important role to play. Aristotle's empathetic list of symptoms can help them better to recognize the disorder and discuss it with their patients, who might then be willing be diagnosed by psychiatric specialists. The list of famous bipolars can be used by therapists to encourage their patients' self-respect in spite of their problems.

Two and a half millennia later Aristotle inspires us to accept ourselves as 'melancholics', to guard against extremes and make better use of the medication and therapies for the advancement of our mental health.

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I have rearranged the original version which has the mean on the right, for the mean to be in the middle and I have added the sub headings hot, tempered and cold melaina cholè.

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