

Published: October 31, 2022

**Citation:** Borg M. T., 2022.  
Bipolar creativity – a short  
history of a concept, Medical  
Research Archives, [online]  
10(10).

<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v10i10.3228>

**Copyright:** © 2022 European Society of Medicine. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v10i10.3228>

ISSN: 2375-1924

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Bipolar creativity – a short history of a concept

Marlies ter Borg<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent Bipolar Philosopher

[\\*marliesterborg@gmail.com](mailto:*marliesterborg@gmail.com)

#### ABSTRACT

This article traces ideas on the link between mood-swing and brilliance, from Greek/Roman to present times. From Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and the physician Aretaeus the story moves to the monasteries: Anthony, Cassian, Benedict, and Augustine ending with Luther who suffered recurrent depression. With his opponent Erasmus we enter the Renaissance. The physician Ficino picks up the Aristotelean concept of melancholy and outstanding achievement. Burton illustrates the two poles of melancholy in a poem.

19th century physicians in France, Pinel and Gachet develop this concept. The German physicians Kraepelin and Leonhard take us into the 20th century, and we end in the US, with DSM-5 in 2013. The terminology develops from melancholy, via acedia, cirkuläres Irresein, manic-depressive to bipolar disorder. Through these terminological and cultural differences a consensus appears that extremes of destructive mania and deep, suicidal depression must be avoided. To achieve this medication is advised.

Creativity is located in the mood just under mania, light hypomania. The term 'bipolar creativity' is coined to shift attention from creative persons with a bipolar disorder to the process of creativity itself. It demands the enthusiasm, high self-esteem, and quick thinking, typical of hypomania. In this process light depression is also important. It's critical stance can play a positive role in breaking the ground for new creations. It is not only the high mood but the alternation of opposite moods that gives scope to creativity. There is a fortunate 'match' between mild bipolar disorder and the bipolar creative process.

## Introduction

This is a short history of the idea that there is a link between bipolar disorder and creativity. This concept is followed through more than two millennia. Is there, underneath the cultural differences and associated variety of terms; melancholy, acedia - bliss, circular, or manic-depressive, and bipolar disorder - a continuity of ideas on the link to creativity?

The last decades have seen many publications on this theme. Unfortunately, there is not enough room in this article to give even a few of them their due credit, so I am sorry that in my article none are named. Some of these studies are quantitative, others biographical, spinning out the lives and moods of famous persons. Added here is a short but systematic history as a context for other studies. This history ends with a philosophical reflection on the process of creativity itself. What are its possibilities if extreme mood is tempered? If light hypomania is the seat of creativity, what is the relevance of the other pole, light depression? Could the process of creativity itself be bipolar?

## Methods

The scope of this article is broad ranging from ancient Greece via the Middle Ages and Renaissance to 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Germany, ending in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the USA. It compares texts from Greek thinkers, one of who was a physician, with writings on mood from monastic circles, and those of a Renaissance physician, and 19<sup>th</sup> century

alienists. It is a European story, including several physicians, from a variety of European countries, ending in 2013 in the USA with DSM-5.

Yet the scope of this article is limited. It does not mention results of empirical or quantitative research or statistics or of biographies of well-known persons. It draws no conclusions on the actual, factual existence of the link between melancholy/bipolar disorder and creativity. I only compare the ways in which it has been described through the ages. This is a history of ideas, the ideas themselves are empirically validated, criticized, and debated by other experts. My goal is to look behind the cultural differences in the various names and descriptions of the link between mood disorder and creativity, to their underlying similarities. The results of this article are tentative, produced by methods of philosophical interpretation and emphatic understanding. The validity of my arguments depends on the degree to which the reader finds them relevant and convincing. As a philosopher, plausibility is my modest aim.

Modest is my attempt to formulate, in the last part, a sketch of the process of what I call 'bipolar creativity'. This is a philosophical reflection on my own experience.

## The classic era

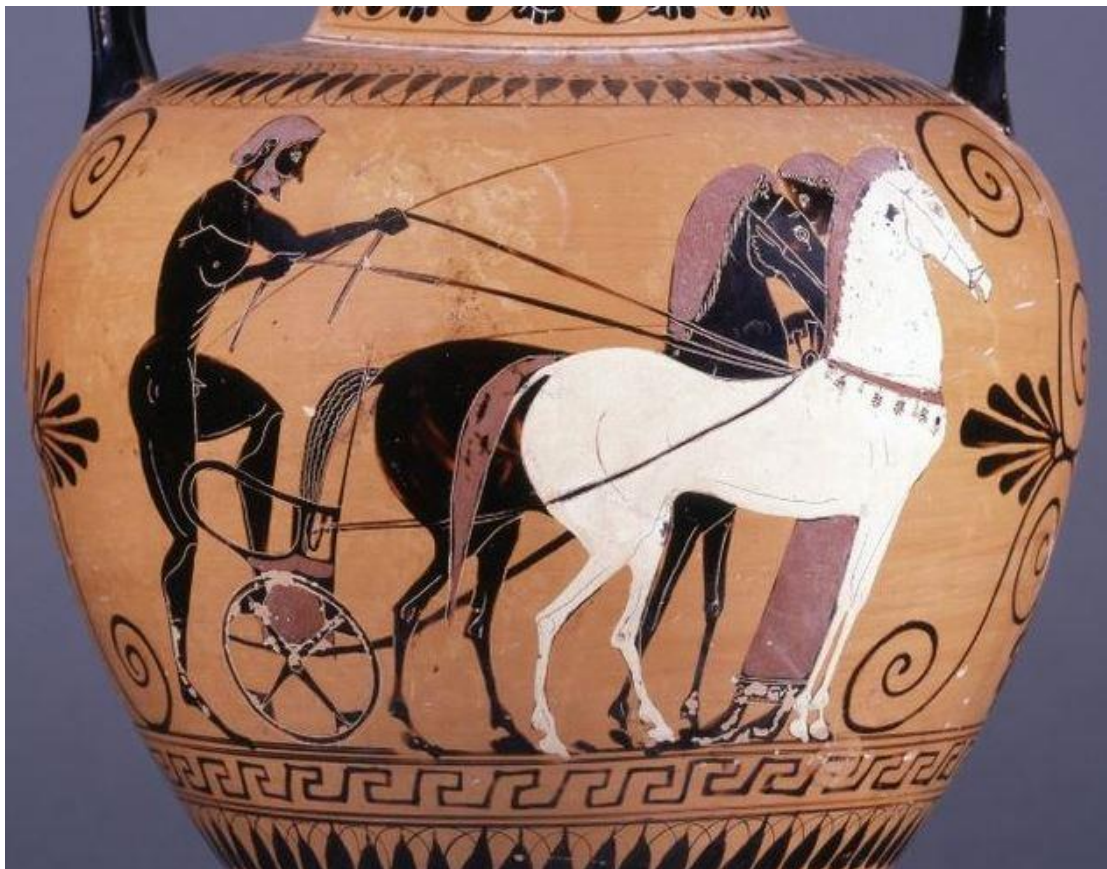
The Greek philosopher Plato, (428-347 BC) was the first to discuss the positive side of mania.

“Our greatest blessings we owe to mania, at least, when we receive it as a gift from the gods.”

His caveat ‘at least when...’ is often overlooked. He implies that there is a divine but also a demonic aspect to mania. It is at most a mixed blessing. There is a creative but also a destructive side to it. The soul (psyche) is a charioteer, supposedly in charge, but in practice dragged by the two horses of mania in different directions. One horse is

“a noble, (white) animal who is guided by word and admonition only, the other a (black) ill-looking villain who will hardly yield to blow or spur. And now a fierce conflict begins...the evil steed rushes forwards and pulls shamelessly. The conflict grows more and more severe; and at last the charioteer, throwing himself backwards, pulling harder than ever at the reins, covers his tongue and jaws with blood, and forces him to rest his legs and haunches with pain upon the ground. When this has happened several times, the villain is tamed and humbled.”<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The two horses of mania



*A chariot with two horses on a vase, Exekias, Athens around 530 AJC, British Museum*

Plato's pupil, Aristotle, (384-322 B.C.) had a more down to earth, factual approach. He sought for the cause of mania, not in divine interference, but in a body fluid, 'melaina cholè'. This fluid was sensitive to temperature and could become very hot or cold, causing the mood to tend to mania or despondency. Aristotle saw the high and the alternating low mood as produced by the same body fluid. He subsumed both moods in a single term, melancholy. In an earlier article I have expanded upon Aristotle's views in relation to modern psychiatric terms<sup>2</sup>. Here the essence of Aristotle's subtle views on bipolar melancholy is given by a few relevant quotes<sup>3</sup>.

"Why do all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts turn out to be melancholics ? " (Greek: Melancholikoi)

"If they are not careful, they can become extremely melancholic. However if their melaina cholè is tempered, they are men of genius."

"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/eminent persons are all melancholics not owing to some (externally induced) illness, but due to their natural constitution."

"Melancholics are in perpetual need of medicine. Depending on coincidence, they

can become the victim of either an extreme exuberance or deep sorrow. And through medical therapy these extremes become less pronounced."

Some three centuries later the Roman philosopher Seneca, (4 B.C.-65 A.D) referred to Aristotle's concept of a link between mood and talent.

"Sometimes it is fun to be insane. We can believe with, Aristotle, never did a great talent exist which was not also slightly mad. Only an agitated soul can speak in an exalted way and on a level that rises far above others. If and when it has freed itself from what is insignificant and ordinary, it can uncover that which is too great for the mouth of a mortal. The soul cannot possibly reach that which is hidden away in a high place unless she breaks loose; it must tear herself from the trodden paths, take over the reins and drag its driver up to the heights to which it would never have dared climb." <sup>4</sup>

Some hundred years later the Roman - Greek physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia, (150-200 A.D) wrote about melancholy and mania<sup>5</sup>. Aretaeus might have known Aristotle's writings, but he does not make explicit mention of him. In his work he uses the word 'melancholy' in a more restricted sense than Aristotle does, and as the opposite of mania, closer to 'depression.'

"For the patients are dull or stern, dejected or unreasonably torpid, without any manifest cause: such is the commencement of

melancholy. And they also become peevish, dispirited, sleepless, and start up from a disturbed sleep. Unreasonable fear also seizes them.'

Aretaeus gives a separate description of mania, both in its inoffensive and its destructive forms.

"And they with whose madness joy is associated, laugh, play, dance night and day, and sometimes go openly to the market crowned, as if victors in some contest of skill; - this form is inoffensive to those around. Others have madness attended with anger; and these sometimes rend their clothes and kill their keepers, and lay violent hands upon themselves."

He does not see mania as an aspect of melancholy as Aristotle did. He makes a clear distinction between the two states.

"For in those who are mad, (manic) the understanding is turned sometimes to anger and sometimes to joy, but in the melancholics to sorrow and despondency only."

Aretaeus does see a link between mania and melancholy in the sense that a person's mind can turn from one extreme to the other. In his experience melancholy can sometimes be the beginning of the opposite state, mania.

"And it appears to me that melancholy is the commencement and a part of mania."

He notes the changeability of one and the same person from one state to the other.

"They are prone to change their mind readily; to become base, mean-spirited, illiberal, and in a little time, perhaps, easy, extravagant, munificent, not from any virtue of the soul, but from the changeableness of the disease. But if the illness become more urgent, hatred, avoidance of the haunts of men, vain lamentations; they complain of life, and desire to die."

Aretaeus sees an underlying connection between the two poles of mood.

"Those prone to the disease, are such as are naturally passionate, irritable, of active habits, of an easy disposition, joyous, puerile; likewise those whose disposition inclines to the opposite condition, namely, such as are sluggish, sorrowful, slow to learn, but patient in labour; Those likewise are more prone to melancholy, who have formerly been in a mad condition. Mania intermits, and with care ceases altogether. And there may be an imperfect intermission when the evil is not thoroughly cured by medicine."

So Aretaeus is more precise than Aristotle about the episodic, circular character of the illness.

Like Aristotle he recommends medicine, especially for mania. He also mentions the positive side of the illness, linking creativity to the mild high mood.



“But the modes are infinite in those who are ingenious and docile,- untaught bring forth astronomy, spontaneous philosophy, poetry truly from the muses; for docility has its good advantages even in diseases.”

‘ingenious and docile’ is a strange phrase. How can anyone even with mild mania be docile? Surely a genius is anything but docile? One would expect ‘headstrong’.

Unfortunately, the translator made a mistake in rendering the English for the Latin words ‘ingeniosus’ and ‘docilis’. The first word can mean anything from talented, full of spirit, inventive, sharp to creative. The right translation for ‘docilis’ in this context is: ‘learned’, (as in doctorate) Docilis implies a lust for learning. Creativity requires hard work so the term spontaneous is misleading. What Aretaeus means is that, coupled to talent, mania (not melancholy), is a positive factor. It can lead to creative contributions in endless variety. Underneath their different use of the term ‘melancholy’ - bipolar versus unipolar - Aristotle and Aretaeus, agree on the contribution that mild mania, now called ‘hypomania’ (hypo Greek for = under) can have in enhancing talent.

### The Monastic Movement

When the Roman Empire disintegrated most of Aristotle’s work was forgotten in the West. What happened to ‘melancholy’? Gachet, Vincent van Gogh’s last doctor, wrote in his thesis *On Melancholy*<sup>6</sup> that these sufferers took refuge in the monasteries. Because of the terminological and cultural discontinuity with the classic texts and those from the

Renaissance this paragraph can be sketchy at most. Mood disorder was important for monastic thinkers. They related it to their aspiration for divine salvation and described it in theological terms. My impressionistic approach is not due to a lack of documents. On the contrary, a surprising amount of documents is available, about mood disorder in general and referring to moods of particular individuals. The literature is so comprehensive that I had to be very selective. Within monasticism mood disorder was a central concern, not only in relation to the wellbeing of the monks, who could easily fall prey to it because of their isolated, ascetic lifestyle, but also in relation to religious aspirations. The 19th century psychologist James<sup>7</sup> points out that:

“Religious geniuses have often shown symptoms of nervous instability. Even more perhaps than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations. Invariably they have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility. Often they have led a discordant inner life, and had melancholy during a part of their career.”

In monastic circles mood was an important sign on the road towards, or away from, salvation. As said, the classic concept of melancholy was lost to Europe and disappeared from public discourse. It was mentioned (for the last time?) by Jerome (374-419), who spent his later life in the desert and a monastery in Bethlehem, set up with likeminded friends. He was very productive.

With his translations of the Bible into Latin he laid the basis of the Vulgate, used by the church for centuries. Jerome himself warned for negative mood overcoming monks.

“Some too there are who from the dampness of their cells and from the severity of their fasts, from their weariness of solitude and from excessive study, turn melancholy mad so as to need the poultices of Hippocratic more than exhortations from me.”<sup>8</sup>

Jerome had a warm relationship with Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), a gifted speaker and writer. He was called ‘the Solitary’ because he left a promising ecclesiastical career for the life of an ascetic monk. He wrote about mood problems of monks, in particular about the defect (vitium)<sup>9</sup> of acedia: translated as sloth, listlessness, boredom, or apathy. It is derived from the Greek term *kēdos*, meaning care, concern. One could say that a person with acedia suffers, as DSM-5<sup>10</sup> puts it, from “lack of interest in all activities.” Evagrius<sup>11</sup> explains:

“The demon of acedia - also called the noonday demon - is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in

some way or other, this too the demon<sup>12</sup> uses to contribute further to his hatred”

The ideas of the Greek Evagrius entered Latin monastic tradition thanks to John Cassian, (360–435), who wrote the following on acedia as the sixth of 8 capital sins or vices:<sup>13</sup>

“Our sixth combat is with what the Greeks call *akhdia*, which we may call weariness or distress of heart. This is akin to dejection, and is especially trying to solitaries, and a dangerous and frequent foe to dwellers in the desert.”

He expands on dejection:

“Sometimes it is found to result from the fault of previous anger, or to spring from the desire of some gain which has not been realized, when a man has found that he has failed in his hope of securing those things which he had planned. But sometimes without any apparent reason for our being driven to fall into this misfortune, we are by the instigation of our crafty enemy suddenly depressed with so great a gloom that we cannot receive with ordinary civility the visits of those who are near and dear to us; and whatever subject of conversation is started by them, we regard it as ill-timed and out of place; and we can give them no civil answer, as the gall of bitterness is in possession of every corner of our heart.”

Acedia and dejection are ‘ulcers’ or disorders which

“Some well-skilled physician can heal by a single salutary change to work; as he knows that all the other bad symptoms, which spring as it were from the same clump, will at once disappear when the cause of the chief malady has been removed.”

There is a Dutch and Rumanian saying, that idleness is the devil’s cushion.

This has a monastic source. I quote Athanasius<sup>14</sup>, (295-373) the biographer of Anthony, the father of monasticism. His description of the struggles of this renowned monk, were read aloud in monasteries during the meal. Athanasius stressed the therapeutic and preventive importance of manual labour.

The devil is filled with joy at the sight of an idle monk. What is the imagination of an idle monk? It is a highway open for all the impure demons. What is his heart? It is a cesspool in which the most hideous temptations are generated and bubble.”

The admonition ‘ORA ET LABORA became the basis of the Monastic Rule<sup>15</sup> formulated by Benedict, (480 - 547).

“*Of the Daily Work*: Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brethren ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times, at others, in devout reading.”

Work was not aimed at material benefits, or worldly success, but was a goal in itself. Work was the therapy against dejection and acedia. The focus on work was new. Aristotle

left work to woman and slaves. Gentlemen should spend their time contemplating and discussing the truth. For the monks coming from all walks of life manual work became spiritually essential. It was this combination of the work ethic with talents, increased perhaps by spiritual turmoil, that made the monks so very innovative in a variety of fields. They reorganized agriculture, built dykes and reclaimed land. They practiced the arts, frescoes and book illuminations. They indulged in learning and developed accounting methods. The monastic rules developed brought a European wide uniformity. A principle of equality and democracy was introduced. All monks from whatever rank or background, were, at least in theory, equal. This was stressed by their wearing the same clothes. ‘Equal monks equal caps.’ The monks chose their leader, the abbot from their own ranks. And last but not least they brewed beer where water was contaminated. After the fall of Rome, monks preserved and developed the remnants of civilization.

The openness with which religious persons wrote about their mood problems is surprising. They express feelings of deep dejection and of unspeakable bliss. Augustine, (354 - 430) confessed his spiritual turmoil in writing.<sup>16</sup> About his dejection he writes:

“Everything filled me with disgust...I had become one big question for myself, and I kept asking my soul why it was so sad, why it tore me apart; one thing only was tasteful to me, my tears.”



From this experience he distilled a hopeful certainty: "Fallor ergo sum" -  
I err therefore I am. If I am deceived, I am."<sup>17</sup>

Augustine also experienced ecstatic states of bliss.

"And now and again Thou bringst me into an extraordinary sensation, a strange bliss inside of me. When it is fully developed it will be something unspeakable, that is no longer of this earthly life."

Augustine introduced the idea that suicide is a sin against God,<sup>18</sup> versus the then accepted Roman/Stoic view of suicide as a heroic and virtuous deed. Unfortunately for well over a millennium the Church held on to suicide as a deep sin, deeper even than murder, because the deed made repentance impossible. The Church forbade burial of its victims in sacred ground and confiscated their inheritance.

From the first era of the monastic movement I skip a millennium, to its disintegration inspired by Luther, (1483- 1546). With the dismantling of the monasteries, the work ethic did not disappear but on the contrary spread to lay persons especially the bourgeois. Initiated as a monastic therapy against depression, it became a pillar of modern society. Luther, the brilliant initiator of the Reformation was subject to recurring depressions which he expressed freely.

"I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. God out of his mere

whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them. We seek to be saved and God in order that He may save rather damns."<sup>19</sup>

Luther communicated his experience of deep depression to the community of believers in a hymn.<sup>20</sup>

"Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay.  
Death brooded darkly o'er me.  
Sin was my torment night and day.  
In sin my mother bore me.  
Yea, deep and deeper still I fell.  
Life had become a living hell.  
So firmly sin possessed me."

Luther also experienced moods of ecstatic bliss, which he expressed in the same hymn.

"Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,  
with exultation springing,  
and with united heart and voice  
and holy rapture singing,  
proclaim the wonders God has done."

Does this make Luther eligible for the list of eminent melancholics? Dr Gachet,<sup>6</sup> added Luther to his list of brilliant melancholics. It is tempting to compare some of Luther's statements with the DSM-5 criteria for major depression. Luther had a structural sense of sinfulness, which, from the perspective of DSM, would count as "excessive or inappropriate guilt". As Luther expresses it:

"My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no

confidence that my merit would assuage him.”

Luther’s mood instability had implications for his theology. His sense of depressive impotence strengthened his belief in predestination, the dogma that man is completely at the mercy of God, that no good works, no prayers, no indulgences avail, that a human being can contribute nothing to his own salvation. This was expressed in the same hymn.

“My own good works availed me naught,  
No merit they attaining;  
My will against God’s Judgment fought,  
No hope for me remaining  
My fears increased till sheer despair  
Left naught but death to be my share.  
The pains of hell I suffered.”

The theological impact of Luther’s depressions can also be found in some of the 95 theses<sup>21</sup> which he supposedly hammered to the door of the church in Wittenberg, commonly seen as the start of the Reformation. Although most of the theses deal with Papal indulgences, used by

the Church to finance the building of the Saint Peter in Rome, a few theses have a wider meaning, relating to the state of the soul or psyche. The first relates to self-esteem, which during a depression can be very low. DSM calls this “feelings of worthlessness.” Luther believed that life-long self-hate was a valuable state of mind signifying repentance.

“Hatred of self, that punishment, that true heartfelt atonement, will remain until we enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>4th</sup> thesis

Luther also had what DSM calls “recurrent thoughts of death .” His 94<sup>th</sup> thesis:

“Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell.”

Another example is the DSM criterion “Depressed mood, most of the day, nearly every day.” In his last, 95<sup>th</sup> thesis Luther advocates a continuing state of sorrow.

“And thus you may be more confident of entering into heaven through continuing sorrow than through the false security of peace.”

## 2. Luther hammering his theses to church door



*Luther Hammers his 95 theses to the door, Pauwels, F. 1872, Eisenach, Warburg Stiftung.*

Luther's contemporary, the humanistic theologian Erasmus, (1466?- 1536) makes fun of a life dedicated to sorrow. A person who is downcast, not content with and harsh towards himself, is for others is irritating and hateful. He is pale and unhealthy and grey before his time. He dies an early death without having lived. Erasmus particularly mentions Luther who is so pricked in conscience as to be lashed and stung with the whips and snakes of grief and remorse. Erasmus points to the debilitating effect of self-hate. He believed that self-esteem was essential to be a loving and productive person. Self-hate makes love for another person very difficult. Commenting on the

Biblical saying "Love thy neighbor as thyself," he asks:

"Can any-one love another that first hates himself? We should sink without rescue into misery and despair, if we were not buoyed up and supported by self-love. Can one achieve anything that is either charming, respectable or worthwhile, if one is not content with oneself?"<sup>22</sup>

These statements were made in Erasmus' book "In Praise of Folly" which deals with many aspects of human irrationality, praising some forms, rejecting others. If self-esteem, self-love is a folly, it's a highly desirable one!

Inflated self-esteem is a DSM criterion for (hypo) mania.

### Renaissance

Erasmus brings us into the Renaissance. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Aristotle's main works had reappeared in Europe via Islamic scholars. They were translated into Latin. Aristotle's notes on melancholy were collected by the Dominican friar Albertus Magnus (1200-1280), a philosopher with a medical education. Albert judges that a specific disposition of and rightly combusted natural melancholy produces excellent scholars and virtuous men.

"According to Aristotle, all persons who excelled in knowledge and heroic virtues turned out to be melancholics."<sup>23</sup>

Two centuries later the Italian philosopher and physician Ficino (1433-1499), who suffered from melancholy, made Aristotle's ideas more widely accessible. Ficino followed Aristotle in distinguishing two sides of melancholy, and warning against both extremes. He summarizes Aristotle's ideas as follows:

"Aristotle states ...that all those who became famous, in whichever field, were melancholics.

Indeed, learned men could be the happiest people if they did not also undergo the negative effects of melaina cholè such as dejection or sometimes even madness. That is why you must try to regulate the temperature of your melaina cholè.

Melancholy tends towards both extremes; if hot it brings forth extreme courage, even fanaticism, extremely cold it produces fear and extreme cowardice. But if tempered, it can, once kindled, burn longer and shine, thanks to a long-lasting and powerful flame producing a strong and lasting activity and radiating power."<sup>24</sup>

Robert Burton, (1577- 1640), himself a melancholic, shows the two faces of the disorder in a poem.<sup>25</sup>

"When I lie waking all alone,  
Recounting what I have ill done,  
My thoughts on me then tyrannize,  
Fear and sorrow me surprise,  
Whether I tarry still or go,  
Methinks the time moves very slow.  
All my griefs to this are jolly,  
Naught so sad as melancholy.

When to myself I act and smile,  
With pleasing thoughts the time beguile.  
When I build castles in the air,  
Void of sorrow and void of fear,  
Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet,  
Methinks the time runs very fleet.  
All my joys to this are folly,  
Naught so sweet as melancholy."

Burton describes the suicidal cold melancholy:

"Lend me a halter or a knife."

Melancholy is no joking matter. According to this creative Englishman bipolar melancholy

can injure the soul more than can a devil or vengeful god. Here the metaphor of hell reappears.

“If there is a hell on earth, then it must be in the heart of one who suffers melancholy.”

Like Aristotle Burton advocates hellebore as medication.<sup>25, 24</sup> The roots of this plant, now called the Christmas rose, was famous in antiquity as an expeller of melancholy. The working of the plant was supposedly discovered by a shepherd boy who saw his furious goats cured after eating it. He applied the formula to the insane daughters of the king of Arcadia, and with success; the ladies were calmed by drinking his goat’s milk. Hellebore was to be found in Anticyra,

a Greek seaside resort so famous, that more than a millennium after it had gone to ruin, it was remembered in sayings. ‘Naviget Anticyram’ literally sail to Anticyra implied ‘you’re a nutcase’. Luther wrote about a disagreeable person:

“Why, I would send him to Anticyra.”<sup>26</sup>

Like Erasmus Burton plays around with the image of the ‘laughing philosopher’ Democritus who supposedly dissected dead animals to find the seat of melaina cholè. This Greek philosopher, who laughed at the vanities of mankind, was painted in the Renaissance, along with philosopher Heraclitus, weeping about worldly vanities.

### 3. Rubens, Democritus the laughing philosopher Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher



*Democritus the laughing philosopher*



*Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher*

*Rubens, P.P (school of) 1637, Museo del Prado, Madrid*



### Nineteenth century

We move to 19<sup>th</sup> century France, where the doctor-reformer Philippe Pinel (1745-1825), literally liberated mental patients from their chains and exchanged coercion for “psychotherapy par persuasion”. He spoke about patients as being estranged from themselves, suffering from alienation. The term alienist was used until, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was replaced by the term ‘psychiatrist,’ Greek for ‘soul doctor’. Pinel located creativity in the enthusiastic phase of melancholy.

“The history of famous men in politics, the sciences and fine arts shows that there are melancholics endowed with an ardent enthusiasm for the masterpieces of the human mind, for profound conceptions, and for all that is great and magnanimous.”<sup>27</sup>

Gachet, (1828-1909) listed an impressive number of great melancholics in his doctoral thesis. These persons had a strong character

and hardened will, powerful instinctive judgment, and excessive passions, all of which helped them to overcome adversity. Their irrepressible urge to dominate and a high level of self-confidence explains their success.

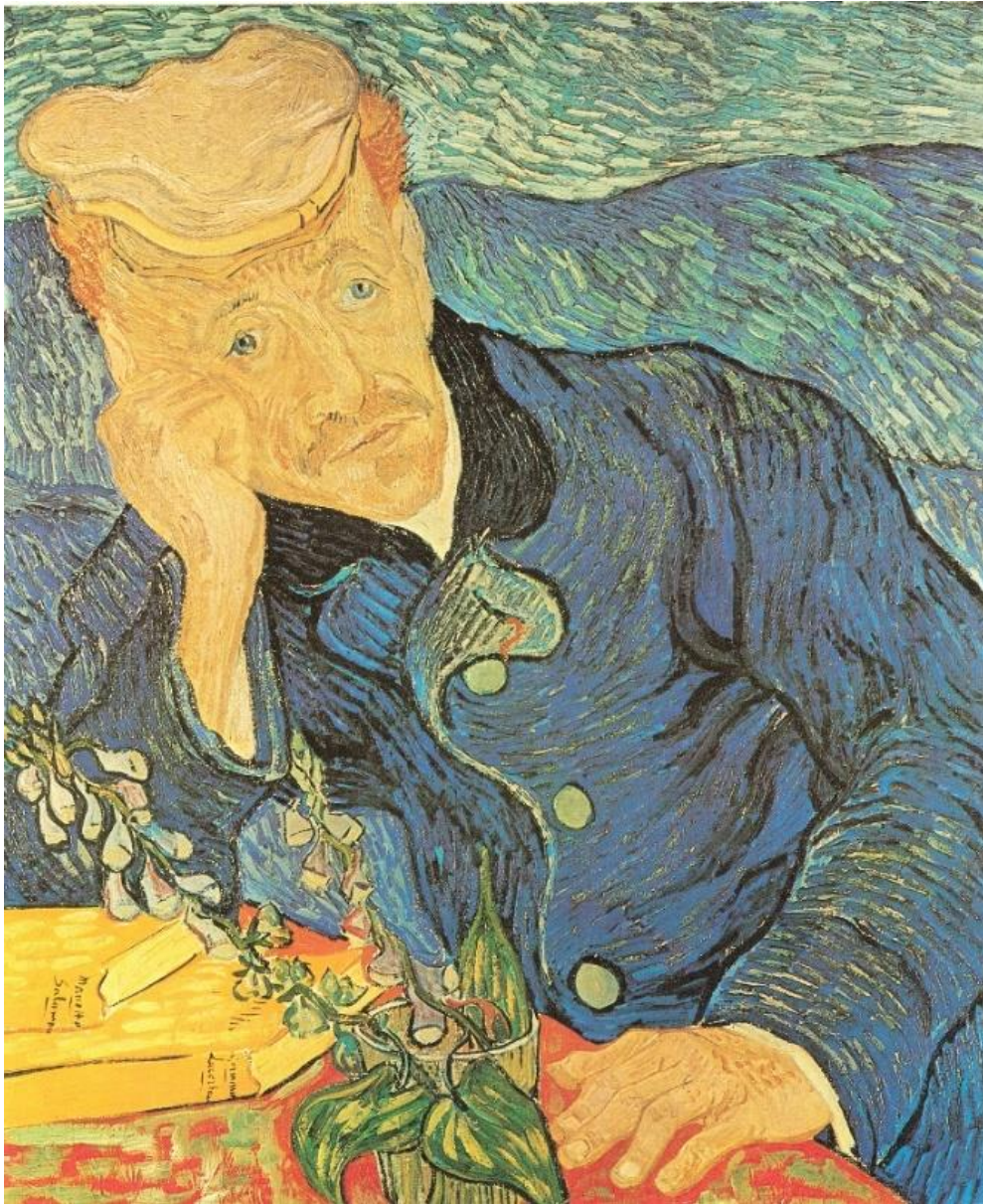
“One could say that all great men, philosophers, tyrants, conspirators, criminals, poets, artists were essentially melancholic beings.”<sup>6</sup>

Gachet had a bipolar concept of melancholy. He described all the nuances of melancholy, using the word ‘depressive’ for one pole of melancholy, as opposed to sociable.

Gachet includes Luther in his list of outstanding melancholics.

Vincent painted his doctor in the melancholy pose, head leaning on his hand. Gachet, an expert on melancholy, was also a sufferer. Van Gogh said of him ‘he is sicker than I am.’

#### 4. Dr Gachet by Vincent van Gogh



*Paul Ferdinand Gachet, 1890, Van Gogh, 1890, private collection*

In 19<sup>th</sup> century France there was an intensive debate among 'alienists' about a "une forme circulaire de maladie mentale". The German term was "zirkulären Irresein". This disorder was thought to have a genetic component.

The term 'zirkulären Irresein' was used by the Nazi Regime in their Euthanasia programme.

### The Nazi Programme T- 4

14.07.1933	Sterilisation
18.10.1935	Forbidding marriage
September 1939	Psychiatric patents executed in Polish institute
End 1939-1941	More than 70.000 psychiatric patients executed in the German Reich.
17.11.42	Introduction of the 'Hungerkost' a starvation policy in many State institutions, some 90.000 deaths
1942-45	'Wild euthanasia' during which patients were executed in 15 special departments with Luminal and Morphium-Scopolamin injections.

So much for the term 'Zirkuläres Irresein, with its bitter connotations. In the meantime the term 'manisch depressives Irresein' was introduced by Kraepelin.<sup>28, 29</sup> As this term won ground, the term 'melancholy' became marginal.

In 1957 the concept of 'bipolar' was introduced by the German physician Leonhard, (1904-1988)<sup>30</sup>, and included in 1980 in DSM-III<sup>31</sup>. In 2020 the link between bipolar disorder and creativity was included in DSM-5.<sup>32</sup>

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

### Bipolar Creativity - a philosophical reflection

Through the ages creativity was seen to be located in mild hypomania, in warm (not hot) melancholy. Characteristics of this mood make this plausible. The hypomanic soul or psyche<sup>33</sup> is enthusiastic, inspired, euphoric, exalted. It is optimistic and hopeful. It trusts

unconditionally allowing it to take high risks. It is full of initiatives and energy, needing littler sleep. It works day and night out of an enthusiastic sense of urgency. It is decisive, locks onto target is not easily disrupted by others. Its perception is sharpened, it literally sees more light. It is a good speaker, talkative, full of ideas. It is passionate, sociable, charismatic, and charming. It has a high self-esteem and a sense of mission. Its talents are given free reign. It is easy to understand why this mood is the seat of creativity.

But what is the point of depression? - that other pole, - when talents lie low, silence reigns, thought slows down. The soul is anxious, doubtful, critical, indecisive. It has a low self-esteem and avoids the path of men. Is this just lost time? Senseless suffering?

To investigate the relevance of depression, it is necessary to understand the process of creating. Unlike animals who mostly rely on instincts, humans have to give their lives meaning, constantly. They do not create meaning alone but in a community: family, company, artistic, religious or scientific circle, nation, or global community.

Together they create what is called a 'world view'.

This is what Aristotle meant when he called the human being a 'Zoon Politikon'.<sup>34</sup> That does not only refer to politics. Politikon should be translated as 'social.' Human beings are and must belong to a community or Polis. They must share in the values, ideas, language, rules, habits, in short the worldview of their community. That gives them a sense of basic security, identity and belonging. It is precious to them for without it chaos would reign. A world without a worldview is a lonely meaningless black abyss. Humans are on the defensive against anyone or anything that might breach their world view. Conformism is desperately needed and must be stubbornly if not aggressively defended.

The creative person steps outside the common meanings in order to create new ones. First the old meanings must be criticised. Thus Descartes advocates rejecting all received opinions, doubting everything one has learnt.<sup>35</sup> By demolishing the old building room is made for a new one. Doubt and criticism refer not only to the world view but also to the psyche itself which is inextricably bound up with it. Descartes acknowledges that doubt should not be too radical! Everyone who embarks on a doubting, criticising, demolishing exercise needs a temporary shelter. Descartes sees doubt in the end as boosting self-esteem. In the critical self-doubting process the doubting psyche can at least be sure that it

exists. Here he follows Augustine. On the firm basis of a, through doubt and error, strengthened identity, a new worldview can be built.

"Fallor ergo sum"- I err therefore I am.  
"Dubito ergo sum" - I doubt therefore I am.

That double doubt of self and world view is heart rending. Something no-one in his right mind would undertake. The demolition of conventional meaning can only be done by a psyche, that is thrown into the abyss of depression. The psyche descends into the darkness of doubt, nolens volens, whether it likes it or not. The psyche does NOT like being grabbed by the throat and pulled down into the dark. Plato realized that the psyche will only undertake radical doubt if it is absolutely forced to. To be freed from the cage of everyday prejudice is a painful process.

"But, I said, if someone would pull him out, would banish him from there with force...wouldn't he cry out in protest?"<sup>36</sup>

The familiar, everyday world, where everything is so simply obvious, is in truth, a strictly confined cave inhabited by shadows. No soul wants to leave the cosy cave of Plato's myth. Only when depression forces the psyche will it doubt those conventions that stand in the way of something new. This is accompanied by sorrow, the soul is mourning the destruction of the familiar worldview. However painful, depression



offers the opportunity for the demolition of the old house in order to build a new one.

Then comes the hypomanic phase of creativity. The soul works hard out of pure enthusiasm. At first it might be a lonely activity, but the psyche reaches out to reclaim part of the common worldview, and fit in its innovation. Its ambition is that its novelty be accepted, applauded. Its sociable temperament drives it on. Here comes another struggle. Many disagree, not only rationally but emotionally. Someone is tampering with their world view and that is dangerous. Their set of common-sense rules are necessary for stability, to prevent chaos. Those small breaches, tiny innovations are felt to be very threatening. The innovator is blamed.

That is when courage is needed. That laudable characteristic of a hypomanic. Going against the grain needs courage. It is essential to overcome the fear of being set aside, left out, criticized, ostracized. However fear belongs to depression. The hypomanic psyche knows no fear. It has piles of (self)confidence! It optimistically imagines everyone is on its side! Or should be, will be. Everyone will love what it is doing. Its enthusiasm embraces, envelopes, surroundings, draws people in. Opponents will soon see the light. So it is not fear, but trust that leads the hypomanic, trust in people and prospects. With the folly of groundless trust it will conquer all opposition, overcome all obstacles. Success assured!

However, the down mood lies waiting. This new depressive phase can be used to polish the product. Flaws the creative hypomanic soul could not see, come under the magnifying glass of self-criticism. The depressed soul works hard, if only to ward off listless acedia.

In the next bout of self-confidence this self-criticism is absorbed and the product improved. If however it is truly new it will stir up trouble. The surroundings want to hold on to the old ways, they feel threatened by radical innovation. This leads to unfair criticism. This is difficult to bear if the self-critical depression returns. Again, the psyche needs a banister to lean on. By now the experience of cyclical mood gives hope. The psyche knows:

“There should be sunshine after rain,  
There should be laughter after pain.  
These things have always been the same.  
So why worry now?”<sup>37</sup>

So there are different phases in the process of creation in which low and high mood each play their part. Hopefully, with bipolar disorder, the opposing poles will appear as needed. The tearing up of meaning, destroying one's self-image and the accompanying world view can happen during a low, cold, depressed episode. All the opposite characteristics, necessary for the development of new meaning, the energy, self-confidence, the trust and charisma appear when the time for rebuilding has come.



It is this bipolar character of innovation which explains the link between bipolar disorder and creativity. Mood swing and creative process follow the same bipolar circle. In words attributed to King Solomon:

“For everything there is a season,  
And a time to every purpose under the  
heaven.  
A time to weep and a time to laugh.  
A time to mourn and a time to dance.  
A time to break down and a time to build  
up.”<sup>38</sup>

### Discussion

Aristotle’s statement that all eminent persons are melancholics is too broad. There are creative persons with other disorders. There are eminent persons who are stable.

Some translators will have us believe the opposite, that Aristotle’s conclusion is that all melancholics are eminent, creative.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, he refers only to the mood of eminent persons. He gives no information on the number of creative persons among melancholics but suggests that this was a minority. Even in our scientific and democratic culture of figures and statistics it is difficult to give more precise information on the size of this creative minority. Statistics depend on the assumptions on what is included in creativity and in ‘bipolar’. For or instance persons with only cyclothymia might escape the researcher’s attention. Therapists might not be aware of the creative activities of their patients simply because they are not discussed. Another

factor is the broadness of the field of creativity. Some modern studies focus on artistic professions. Aristotle mentions not only poetry, but also philosophy, politics, military strategy and a variety of practical fields. If we add work done in his time by slaves and women, the field is broader still. And then not all creative melancholics are eminent or well-known. Many act on a lower level, organizing and inventing new ways of acting in their small circle without coming into the spotlight.

Even without precise figures it is clear that persons who can make good use of their mood cycles are a minority. The majority only struggle and suffer. However they may find consolation in a sense of belonging to the ‘melancholy family’ of eminent persons, as citizens identify with a monarch or a popstar.

There is a consensus through the ages light hypomania is the location of creativity. Aristotle values both poles.

“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.”

There are situations which demand cold melancholy. (Self) critical depression is needed to prepare the ground for building truly new meanings. Seneca notes that before the soul can become creative.

“she must tear herself from the trodden paths”

To be freed from the cage of everyday prejudice is a painful process, as Plato recognised.

“But, I said, if someone would pull him out, would banish him from there with force...wouldn't he cry out in protest?”

Augustine and Descartes show that this painful process can strengthen the identity of the psyche. I doubt therefore I am. I err therefore I am. Descartes points out that someone entering radical doubt needs a 'bannister'. Luther and Erasmus both have part of the truth. Erasmus praises the folly of self-love for its productivity and ability to love others. Indeed hypomania is characterized by high self-esteem, sociability and productivity. Luther has a point in appreciating self-hate. The self-doubt and low self-esteem, typical of depression, are relevant before and after hypomanic creativity. But self-'hate' is going too deep, it will cause sloth or acedia, if not suicide. It certainly must not be allowed to last.

### Practical suggestions

There is no inherent antagonism between medication and creativity. Since Aristotle medication has been advocated to avoid destructive extremes. The introduction of lithium and other effective mood stabilizers provide possibilities for fine tuning. Therapist and patient can now actively seek that balance advocated through the ages to enhance the creative advantages of bipolar 'melancholy'.

Therapists should be careful, especially in the case of creative persons, that neither mild hypomania nor mild depression are suppressed by medication. In practice a balance can be reached in a trial-and-error process combining blood monitoring of lithium levels with verbal therapy. Next to a check based on DSM criteria to recognize extremes, therapy should include 'creativity monitoring'. The therapist asks the patient what he/she is working on: organizing, writing, painting, discovering, inventing. If the patient starts enthusiastically explaining his or her new project, all is well. The therapist must show sincere interest in the patient's project to gain trust. For the patient during a hypomanic episode the latest project is of the highest importance and all the rest is by-the-way. Sharing this enthusiasm opens the patient's mind to listen to and follow the therapist's medical advice. However, if the patient has no ongoing project, a red light starts flashing. If the creative bipolar is not creating, there is something wrong. Perhaps a slight reduction of the medication could help?

Or the patient could be entering a depressive episode. Now the therapist can act as bannister, not stopping but acting as support during the downward movement. He might discuss with the patient if a certain amount of suffering is perhaps unavoidable, even useful. Relevant questions here could be: what in particular are you doubting at the moment? Which crippling assumptions are you breaking free from? Does that give room for something new?

After the project is completed light depression may again set in. Relevant questions could refer to negative reactions from the patient's surroundings. How do these relate to the originality of your work? How can you protect yourself against harsh reactions or coldshouldering? Perhaps you can shake off unfair criticism as a bird shakes off irritating drops of water.

### Conclusion

This short history has revealed a consensus on the link between bipolar disorder and creativity. In every age the danger of

extremes was stressed. Medication was advocated. Creativity is generally considered to be located in the mild high mood. However, the (self)doubt of mild depression is relevant as a preparation for creativity, and in the critical, polishing phase following it. It is not only the high mood but the alternation of opposite moods that gives scope to creativity. For a significant minority of persons there is a fortunate 'match' between the bipolar creative process and mild bipolar disorder. This can be cultivated in a combined effort of therapist and patient.

### Images

1. A chariot with two horses on a vase, Exekias, Athens around 530 AJC, British Museum
2. Luther Hammers his 95 theses to the door, Pauwels, F. 1872, Eisenach, Warburg Stiftung
3. Democritus the laughing philosopher; Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, Rubens, P.P (school of) 1637, Museo del Prado, Madrid
4. Paul Ferdinand Gachet, 1890, Van Gogh, 1890, private collection

**Conflict of Interests:** The author declares that no conflicts of interests exist.

### Author and Affiliations:

Dr Marlies ter Borg  
Independent Bipolar Philosopher  
[marliesterborg@gmail.com](mailto:marliesterborg@gmail.com)

References:

1. Plato, Phaedrus, 370 BC. Oxford World Classics, translator: Robin Waterfiel, 2010
2. Ter Borg, M. Aristotle and DSM on 'Bipolar' Melancholy: Symptoms, Medication, Link to Creativity, *ESMED Medical Research Archives*, May 2021
3. Aristotle, On Melancholy, ter Borg M. Independent Publisher, Amazon, 2013
4. Seneca, De Tranquillitate Animi On Peace of Mind IX.10-11, 49 to 62, Lulu.com, 2016
5. Aretæus, Consisting of Eight Books, On the Causes, Symptoms and Cure of Acute and Chronic Diseases; Translated by John Moffat, M.D, Gale, 2018, Book I, chapter V on Melancholy, chapter VI on Mania.
6. Gachet, l'Étude sur la Melancholie, Montpellier 1858 publisher Typ. de Boehm, 1858  
[www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histoire/medica/resultats/index.php?do=page&cote=TMON1858x038&p=43](http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histoire/medica/resultats/index.php?do=page&cote=TMON1858x038&p=43)
7. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience 1902, Penguin classics 1985
8. Jerome, Letter 25 to Rusticus. New Advent org.
9. Vitium is often translated as Capital Sin, of which 8 were acknowledged, including Sloth . Sin is a very heavy translation, with moral overtones. The Latin word vitium also means a disorder or defect of the soul or psyche.
10. American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, (DSM-5) 2013 revised edition 2020
11. Evagrius The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer, Cistercian Publications, 1970
12. Demon can be translated as mood, eudaimonia is good mood, happiness and kakodaimonia bad mood.
13. Cassian, On the Eight Vices, orthodoxchurchfathers.com  
John Cassian The Institutes, Coptic Orthodox St Shenouda Monastery 2020
14. Athanasius, The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus - Translation and introduction by Gregg R.C. The Classics of Western Spirituality.
15. Rule of Benedict, Regula Sancti Benedicti, 516 chapter XLVIII, Courier Corporation, 2012
16. The Confessions of Saint Augustine, 400, XL,65 translator Ryan, J.K. 1960
17. Augustine The City of God, Penguin Random House, 1994 Gateway Editions 1996, Intro: Hibbs, T.S.



18. Idem 413–426  
Erasmus and Martin Luther discourse on free will translated by Winter E F Bloomsbury Revelations 2013
19. Bainton R H Here I stand, a life of Martin Luther. Penguin Random House 2002 p. 65,135
20. Luther M The Lutheran Hymnal 387 Dear Christians, one and all rejoice, German title Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein, 1523, translator Richard Massie, 1854, website Hymnary.org
21. Luther M Disputatio pro Declaratione Virtutis Indulgentiarum. All Souls Allerheiligen Abend 1517 Ninety-five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences online Website Luther's 95 theses (in Latin Georgetown.edu)
22. Erasmus D. In praise of folly ch. 22, 37 translator Wilson J Dover Thrift editions 2003
23. Albertus Magnus, De animalibus "Sicut Aristoteles in libro de Problematibus dicit, asserens quod omni excelsi in sapientia et heroicas virtutes habentes, fere fuerunt melancholici."
24. Ficino, De vita libri tres, Three Books of Life, 1482, Angela Vos, 2006
25. Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, 1621. p.11-1, Angus Gowland, Penguin Classics 2020
26. Luther, M. The Bondage of will, De servo Arbitrio 1525 in Desiderius
27. Pinel, P. Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale ou La manie 1801, p. 136
28. Kraepelin, E. 1907 reprint 2015, Die Melancholie, ein Zustandsbild des manisch-depressiven Irresein. Verlag der Wissenschaften, Berlin
29. Kraepelin, E. Manic-depressive insanity and paranoia, translated by Barclay, R.M. published by Livingstone, 1921.
30. Perris, C. The importance of Karl Leonhard's classification of endogenous psychoses, Psychopathology 1990
31. American Psychiatric Association, DSM III, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.
32. DSM-5 American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, 2013, revised edition 2020, p. 136
33. I use the word soul or psyche as gender neutral- ' it'
34. Aristotle Politics 1. 1253a, Oxford World Classics, 2009
35. Descartes R. Méditations Métaphysique Première Méditation

36. Plato, The Republic, 518a Translation:  
Desmond Lee, Penguin 1955
37. Why worry, Mark Knopfler, Publisher:  
Universal Music Publishing Group, sung  
first by Everly Brothers 1989
38. Bible, KJV Ecclesiastes 3:4