

## **Kant on melancholy: philosophy as a relief to the disgust for life**

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### **Abstract**

Melancholy occupies a privileged place in the Kantian taxonomy of temperaments since the pre-critical phase, but it is in the Nineties that it reveals its philosophical fecundity. Melancholy becomes, in fact, an interesting notion not so much because of its relationship with Kantian biography, nor because of its presence in the description of psychopathies, but because it lies, unique in this, on the borderline between pathology and sanity. Melancholy thus provides an opportunity to show the topicality of Kantian reflection on mental illness since it underlines the continuity, and not the rupture, between the healthy mental state and that affected by illness, in line with today's most widespread tendencies to consider mental illness as a privileged observatory of the subject.

### **Key words**

melancholy, mental disease, pain, temperament, disgust

Kant writes in the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (§ 50): melancholy (*Tiefsinnigkeit, melancholia*) “is itself not yet a mental derangement, but it can very well lead to it”, it “can also be a mere delusion of misery which the *gloomy* self-tormentor (inclined to worry) creates”. It is so easy to take as melancholic “only a profoundly thoughtful (*tiefdenkenden*) person” (Anth, AA 7: 213; tr. p. 107)<sup>1</sup>.

Melancholy has a privileged place in Kantian taxonomy of temperaments since the pre-critical period, starting from the relationship between the melancholic state of mind and

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<sup>1</sup> There may also be here an interplay of words on Kant's part between the terms *Tiefsinnigkeit* (Melancholy) and *tiefdenkenden* (thoughtful).

the feeling of the sublime in the *Observations*. Also in the *Essay on the maladies of the head*, melancholy stays as one of the main temperaments Kant describes. It is however in the writings on anthropology that melancholy reveals its philosophical fertility. By comparing Kant's *Lectures on Anthropology* and the *Anthropology from a pragmatical point of view*, melancholy shows up as a complex notion, not only relevant in Kant's biography (think for example to Vahinger's essay, *Kant als melancholiker* [H. Vahinger 1898]), or for its presence in the description of psychopathies, but because it is placed on the border between pathology and healthy mental state.

The thesis I will support states that melancholy signs the boundary between disease and temperament, showing more the continuity than the break between sane and insane mental state. I will also support that, collecting the many passages in the anthropological writings dedicated to melancholy, we can observe a twofold and opposite direction. Melancholy can be meant as *Tiefsinnigkeit*, as a deep insight typical of the scientific thought and of philosophizing, or it can degenerate in mental disease when, on the contrary, melancholy is born from boredom and it brings to nausea or disgust (*Überdruß*) towards life. I will compare this mood with duties towards oneself and I will point at philosophizing and at cultivating one's own spiritual progress as a possible therapy against melancholy. The aim will be to show that cultural autopreservation is part of duties towards oneself just as physical autopreservation. Philosophy carries so out the task of "soul dietetic" by avoiding to the subject a degeneration of melancholy in mental illness, through a search of the unity of life. The two directions melancholy can follow, towards the sane or towards the insane state of mind, can so be summarize as such: when melancholy is a kind of uneasiness combined with curiosity, it becomes an element of the process of knowledge and it comes near to the embarrassment we feel in front of the world when we are amazed of it; on the contrary, when melancholy is not involved in a movement of the state of mind, it describes the mood of the subject stuck in a state of boredom that leads to self-loathing, madness and suicide.

Melancholy gives so the occasion to show the actuality of Kant's thought on mental illness, in line with the nowadays most common trends to consider mental illness as a privileged observatory for the subject (see E. Brady-A. Haapala 2003; J. Radden 2002). As Kandel has recently written: "every activity we engage in, every feeling and thought that gives us our sense of individuality, emanates from our brain. When you taste a peach, make a difficult decision, feel melancholy, or experience a rush of joyous emotion when looking at a painting, you are relying entirely on the brain's biological machinery. Your brain makes you who you are" (E.R. Kandel 2018, p. 23). I will follow so a clear methodological framing within a "dialectical" perspective on mental illness, that is within a point of view considering psychopathy nor as a loss of reason nor as an annihilation of humanity but as opposition to the sane mental state and as its definition in negative.

### 1. Melancholy in 18th century

The possibility to state a thesis supporting that melancholy lays in between madness and healthy state of the mind is allowed by the same methodology followed by Kant. In dealing with mental diseases, Kant applies a method consolidated between the Fifties and the Sixties of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a method developed and promoted by the class of experimental philosophy at the Berlin Academy of Sciences (L. Lattanzi 2013). In the 1759 *Lois de Beausobre* reports three *Memoires* dedicated to madness and published only seven years later (L. de Beausobre 1766 and 1767). Beausobre's *Memoires* are relevant to my research not only because they are a source for Kant and reveal an interest in madness within the context of Wolff's psychology, but especially because they support a thesis of continuity between the healthy and the sick mental state starting from a reflection on melancholy. Referring to Leibniz's metaphysics and to Johann Georg Sulzer's reprise in his research on pleasure (1751 and 52), Beausobre deals with madness from the study of the functioning of the imagination, as Kant did in his writings on anthropology. This is associated with a comparison with modern French philosophy, with postcartesian thought, but above all with the contemporary *Encyclopedie*, in which, under the voice *Delire*, D'Aumont writes that the three main forms of illness of the spirit are delirium, "mania" and precisely "melancholy" (D'Aumont 1966, p. 44).

Beyond this, according to the perspective that has been spreading in Germany since the end of the Fifties, the madman is therefore the one who is unable to see clearly the connection between ideas: that is to say, without going beyond classical rationalism. Within this context, scholars examine madness because they want to identify not only what distinguishes it, but also what opposes it to reason, yet at the same time it becomes clear that no one can say he is at safe and that mental illness can appear from a simple error of the imagination. Placing the cause of madness in the imagination means in fact recognizing that the madman has no false perceptions, but rather his imagination alters his perceiving. The state of the madman is therefore irreducible to a state of disease: the madman is never just a sick person. A clear example of the ambiguous character of the functioning of the imagination is the poetic activity, which allows to show how the imaginative action moves on the border between madness and artistic creation. For Beausobre, poets do not confuse reality with the ghosts of their imagination, yet they are often so caught up in their images that they seem to feel their presence. When poets almost come to feel the presence of the ghosts of their imagination, they are not far from the fools.

It is therefore a question of reflecting on the possibility of extending the imagination: a reflection that is widely shared by the philosophers who developed Wolff's psychology, especially within the aesthetic thought and within the theories of the sublime; according to Beausobre, we actually have to consider also the risks of this extension of imagination in terms of psychopathy. Within this reflection, melancholy constitutes the privileged case study, and the medical examples proposed to investigate the relationship between imagination and mental illness almost always lead to the treatment of melancholy. The examples suggest that madness is not an extraordinary pathological condition, but a state of

the soul to which everyone is exposed, at least in certain forms, or for some time (Lattanzi 2013).

As Beausobre expressly states, if in the soul of every man, at every moment, the representations of the past are mixed with those of the present, and the imagination continually alters the sensations, the only difference between the mad and the reasonable people is the degree of liveliness of the imagination. The point of passage, the moment when the soul begins to push towards madness is imperceptibly marked by the 'degree of assent' given to the representations of the imagination (L. de Beausobre 1767, p. 405; see Ch. Wolff 1747, p. 130).

Beausobre illustrates the nature of madness by describing the classical symptoms of "mélancolias", which he considers the "first degree" of madness. This disorder arises when the imagination is left free to concentrate on one idea, usually a sad one, that hides all other representations, including distinct ideas, hindering the exercise of reason. In this condition it is possible – though not necessary, as Beausobre points out elsewhere – that the ghosts of the imagination are confused with the sensations to the point of replacing them, pushing the soul to madness (L. de Beausobre 1768, p. 431).

As it is caused by a specific activity of the imagination, madness is, however, different from melancholy, which Beausobre elsewhere defines as the "first degree" of madness: even melancholy is a moral disorder determined by psychological causes, but the origin is the concentration of the soul on a few unpleasant ideas, without the imagination necessarily altering the feelings.

## *2. Melancholy as temperament*

Kant seems to have exactly these reflections in mind when in his *Anthropology*, in the section dedicated to the character, he defines the melancholic temperament. Kant recognizes the ambiguity of melancholy, between illness and healthy depth of thought, and immediately he makes a distinction between those who have an emotional tonality prone to melancholy and the actual melancholy (see Sturm 2009). Only the latter indicates a state, a stasis in a certain position of the soul. The melancholic temperament instead indicates a tendency, a movement in those who pay great attention to the things that happen to them, in those who direct their attention primarily to the difficulties. Whoever tends to melancholy is profound in thought, avoids making promises, moved by moral causes, is embarrassed by contrariety and suffers from an inability to experience joy. He suffers then from the inability to reach full pleasure (Anth, AA 7: 288; tr. p. 188).

As Robert Loudon notices, there is a remainder of the second section of the *Observations* relates Kant's distinction between beautiful and sublime moral characters to the traditional division of characters into phlegmatic, melancholic, sanguine, and choleric (R. Loudon 2006, p. 206); the most interesting point here is his characterization of the melancholic, not as someone who deprives himself of the joys of life, but as someone who "subordinates his sentiments to principles," and who therefore makes his desires "the less subject to

inconstancy and alteration the more general is this principle to which they are subordinated [...]. All particular grounds of inclinations are subjected to many exceptions and alterations in so far as they are not derived from such a higher ground” (GSE, AA 2: 220; tr. p. 27). Here Kant clearly anticipates his mature model of morality: it does not require the elimination of natural feelings and desires, but their governance in accordance with universal principles of reason.

Also through this reference it is clear that melancholy is a tone of the soul, a trend, which may or may not be predominant.

It is Kant’s own definition of temperament that places the melancholic tendency among the movements of the soul: “considered *psychologically*, that is, when one means temperament of soul (faculties of feeling and desire), those terms borrowed from the constitution of the blood will be introduced only in accordance with the analogy that the play of feelings and desires has with corporeal causes of movement (the most prominent of which is the blood). [... Each temperament] can be connected with the excitability (*intensio*) or slackening (*remissio*) of the vital power, only four simple temperaments can be laid down (as in the four syllogistic figures, by means of the *medius terminus*): the *sanguine*, the *melancholy*, the *choleric*, and the *phlegmatic*” (Anth, AA 7: 286-7; tr. p. 186; see Larrimore 2001).

It is therefore clear that melancholic temperament is characterized by a dynamism that defines it, by a tendency, compatible, if not favourable, with aesthetic feeling and moral attitude. It is a trait of the character moved by vital forces and driven to research and depth of thought that cannot find a definitive conclusion in satisfaction: it is the state of those who are moved by authentic curiosity and “what is called a crotchety person (who is not mentally ill; for by this we usually mean a melancholic perversion of inner sense), is mostly a human arrogance that borders on dementia” (Anth, AA 7: 203; tr. p. 97). This is clear also in the *Lectures on Anthropology (Anthropologie Friedländer)*: «One calls the pondering of the power of judgment whims. A “cricket” is a “grasshopper”. Who catches such “grasshoppers” is a “cricket-catcher.” Thus, whoever pursues empty thoughts which have no use, is a ponderer and a melancholy individual (*Grillenfangen*)» (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 520; tr. p. 87).

### 3. Melancholy as disease

Different is the case of melancholy, i.e. the individual affected by psychopathy. In the precritical essay *On Maladies of the head*, “The *melancholic* is a gloomy person who is demented with respect to his sad or offensive conjectures” (VKK, AA 2: 268; tr. p. 214). In *Anthropology*, therefore, there is a gradual and continuous shift from the “crotchety person”, on this side of the healthy state of mind, to the more moderate deviation. The mildest of all deviations is the “hobbyhorse”: it is a slight obsession that consists in keeping busy with an idea or objects of the imagination with which the intellect plays for fun. Older people, for example, play games of this kind, which are good for health, keep their vital forces active and make them laugh like in a new, carefree childhood (Anth, AA 7: 204; tr. p. 98). The risk of melancholy leading to a form of illness is clearly expressed in

*Anthropologie Mrongovius*: «Melancholy must stem from this displeasure with life, which in turn must be derived from the deep penetration of the sensations on the mind. [...] The mind becomes disturbed in the sensation of life through this assiduity, and melancholy thus arises. (The melancholic has in general a habitual attachment to all representations.) Even enjoyment upsets the melancholic more than it pleases him; for once he becomes merry, he is totally giddy because everything makes an impression on him so deeply. The cause of his sadness is that everything appears to him to be so important, for he fears losing the agreeable, and then he views the agreeable as a great ill» (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1372; tr. p. 468).

The real entry into mental illness, on the line of melancholy, occurs instead when there is no movement. “Absentmindedness” occurs when the reproductive power of imagination shows mental deficiencies in a representation on which one has paid great attention and from which one is not able to get away: “that is, one is not able to set the course of the power of imagination free again. If this malady becomes habitual and directed to one and the same object, it can turn into dementia” (Anth, AA 7: 206-7; tr. p. 101).

For this reason, distract oneself, that is moving from a fixed idea or a static thought, is healthy for the reproductive power of imagination: it is even “a necessary and in part artificial precautionary procedure for our mental health” (Anth, AA 7: 207; tr. p. 101). So as “*Recollecting oneself (collectio animi)*” makes the subject ready for every new occupation and so “promotes mental health by restoring the balance between one’s powers of soul” (Anth, AA 7: 207; tr. p. 101). In Kant’s account, in line with the customs of eighteenth century society, the healthiest way of keep the powers of soul in movement is “social conversation filled with varied subjects, similar to a game” (Anth, AA 7: 207; tr. p. 101). Kant then elaborates a kind of dietetics for the mind, which preserves from mental illness and from deviations of the imagination: it consists first of all in the art of distract oneself in order to collect one’s mental abilities: “thus to distract oneself without being distracted is an art that is not common” (Anth, AA 7: 208; tr. p. 102). This is precisely the capacity of the health melancholic spirit to abandon itself to deep thoughts and let itself be guided by the movements of its own curiosity.

On the contrary, the insane melancholic is stuck in a state of boredom. Boredom appears as a mental disease properly as incapacity to connect ideas: “the conversation must not jump from one topic to another, contrary to the natural relationship of ideas, for then the company breaks up in a state of mental distraction, since everything is mixed together and the unity of the conversation is entirely missing. Thus the mind finds itself confused and in need of a new distraction in order to be rid of that one” (Anth, AA 7: 207; tr. p. 101). This is the typical shift from the melancholic temperament, who needs distractions and finds them in conversations, and the insane melancholic state of mind, who is confused and bored. “Boredom is [so] perceived as a void of sensation by the human being who is used to an alternation of sensations in himself, and who is striving to fill up his instinct for life with something or other” (Anth, AA 7: 233; tr. p. 128). In *Anthropologie Mrongovius* the connection between melancholy, boredom, mental illness and disgust for life is explicit:

«boredom is the disgust that one has for a condition in which one finds oneself. – It is the great ill and the cause of much evil» (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1336; tr. p. 440). Of course, each of us can feel bored, and this precisely confirm the idea that madness is not something that firmly distinguish the sane from the insane: coherently with the time he was living, Kant recognizes that nobody will be at safe from mental disease.

#### 4. The priority of pain and a philosophical dietetics

Discussing the relationship between pleasure and sorrow, in the section immediately following the one dedicated to mental illness, Kant still shows that he adheres to the ideas of Sulzer, but also of Locke and Pietro Verri, giving priority to pain. “What directly (through sense) urges me to leave my state (to go out of it) is disagreeable to me – it causes me pain; [but if] Enjoyment is the feeling of promotion of life; pain is that of a hindrance of life [...] Therefore pain must always precede every enjoyment; pain is always first. For what else but a quick death from joy would follow from a continuous promotion of the vital force, which cannot be raised above a certain degree anyway?” (Anth, AA 7: 231, tr. p. 126)<sup>2</sup>.

In this alternation of pleasure and pain governed by the negative element, Kant again sees the need for soul movement. Boredom is considered an even worse evil than pain and can sometimes push one to harm oneself, to seek suffering or even to self-destruction in order to get out of the immobile state of boredom. In Kant’s mental dietetics, boredom is perceived as “a void of sensation”, as a lack of vital forces, whereas the human being is used to an alternation of sensations in himself, of pleasure and pain: the human being “is striving to fill up his instinct for life with something or other” (Anth, AA 7: 233; tr. p. 128). In the *Lectures on anthropology*, ‘melancholy’ is used so as a synonym for ‘boredom’, which is interpreted by Pietro Verri in his theory of the ‘unnameable pain’ (P. Verri 1781).

Melancholy as mental disease is identified also with a sort of disgust for life. In the paragraph dedicated to boredom and amusement, the healthy mental state consists both in living life and in enjoying oneself; in Kant’s words, this means “to feel oneself continuously driven to leave the present state (which must therefore be a pain that recurs just as often as the present)” (Anth, AA 7: 233, tr. p. 128). In this perspective it is easy to understand how boredom constitutes a form of oppression perceived even as an attempt on life for those who take care of their lives and their time, i.e. for the “cultivated human beings”. Boredom is not just the static state of mind that cannot go further with life. Boredom is also defined as that empty distraction, as the “pressure or impulse” to leave every point of time, it is the inability to stay in the moment you are living, which generates

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<sup>2</sup> See also *Anthologie Mrongovius*: «The Italian Count Verri168 <(Meiners translated his writing on the nature of enjoyment)> says, among other things, that the beautiful arts and sciences are means against the nameless pains of boredom. If we always had enjoyment, that would not benefit us at all, for we would not be conscious of our life. With pain we actually feel our existence. Boredom is incessant, nameless pain. Sensitive persons often have it» (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1316; tr. p. 425).

a continuous sliding into the next moment, with inconclusiveness and dissatisfaction, in an endless process. Boredom can so “grow until a man makes the resolution to end his life; for the luxurious person has tried every form of enjoyment, and no enjoyment is new to him any longer” (Anth, AA 7: 233, tr. p. 129). It becomes so clear that boredom is not just a mere vice, but it is a serious illness of the mind, typical of Modernity and I would say also of our contemporaneity. And, for Kant, nobody is at safe. The bored melancholic perceives the void of sensations that “arouses a horror (*horror vacui*)”. Boredom is so perceived as a “slow death” which can be more difficult to bear than even a pain that directly threatens our lives.

This is why in *Anthropologie Friedländer* melancholy and loathing are juxtaposed: «The melancholic and loathsome situation is such a one in which the individual does not like himself. Loathing is in itself disagreeable; accordingly the rebuke of vice from the standpoint of loathing is to be eliminated. There are vices whose disapproval at all times produces loathing, and these are vices against nature; hence they are also unspeakable. Among all the sensations, loathing has no substitute, because it inhibits the source of life. Sadness does not inhibit the source of life, but is a hindrance over which one must predominate. Thus bitter dishes are more likely to be edible than loathsome ones. All other frames of mind, for example, anger, are agitations, thus also animations, but loathing is a suppression of agitation, and therefore no animation» (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 564; tr. p. 121).

Pain can therefore be a promotion of life if it gives rise to movement from a state of immobility. And here comes the positive and sane function of the melancholic tendency, as the tendency of never feeling a full joy: “But what about contentment (*acquiescentia*) during life? – For the human being it is unattainable [...] As an incentive to activity, nature has put pain in the human being that he cannot escape from, in order always to progress toward what is better” (Anth, AA 7: 234-5; tr. p. 130). To be completely satisfied with one's life, without any incentive for further improvement, would therefore be a state of immobility and would inevitably lead to unhealthy boredom. Such a state is no more compatible with the intellectual life of the human being and it could even lead to a slow death unless a stimulus leads to a new movement, even if painful.

Paradoxically, it comes out then that the melancholic state of the insane mind, the insane boredom, can be opposed exactly by the melancholic tendency to deal with deep thoughts. For Kant, the remedy to boredom and to the mental illness is so a philosophical diet that allows the mind to alternate pain and enjoyment, that is through cultivating culture and fine arts. As Kant writes in one note, “our reading public of refined taste is always sustained by the appetite and even the ravenous hunger for reading ephemeral writings (a way of doing nothing), not for the sake of self-cultivation, but rather for enjoyment. So the readers' heads always remain empty and there is no fear of over-saturation” (Anth, AA 7: 234, tr. p. 129).

Here comes then one way of enjoying ourselves that “is also a way of cultivating ourselves”; this self-cultivation consists in increasing the capacity for having more

enjoyment from the intellectual life, and this applies to “the sciences and the fine arts”. There is so “a principal maxim” for Kant’s philosophical dietetics: that in order to avoid mental illness, we have always to “climb still further”; on the contrary, “being satiated produces that disgusting state that makes life itself a burden for the spoiled human being” (Anth, AA 7: 237; tr. p. 133).

In conclusion, in Kant’s treatment of melancholy, cultivating culture and fine arts becomes a duty towards oneself, a duty that according to his philosophical dietetics allows the melancholic tendency to deep thoughts and prevents against the melancholic state of boredom.

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