

Avicenna on Melancholy: selected passages from The Canon of Medicine

Avicenna, *The Canon of Medicine*, vol. 1 ed. by Laleh Bakhtiar, transl. by Laleh Bakhtiar, O. Cameron Gruner, Mazar H. Shah et al., Chicago 1999, pp. 17, 31, 151-152, 281 (excerpts).

Avicenna, *The Canon of Medicine*, vol. 3: *Special Pathologies*, ed. by Laleh Bakhtiar, transl. by Peyman Adeli Sardo, Chicago 2014, pp. 126-142 (excerpts).

- A. The basics: humoral theory and the temperaments
- B. A first definition: Melancholy as an excess of black bile
- C. External causes of sadness
- D. The pathology, symptoms and treatments of the various types of melancholy

A. The basics: humoral theory and the temperaments

LECTURE 3: THE TEMPERAMENTS

3.1. A DISCUSSION ON THE TEMPERAMENTS

§32 Temperament¹ is the quality which results from the mutual interaction of the four contrary, primary qualities of elements. By dividing up into minute particles, the elements are able to secure an intimate contact among themselves.

§33 These elements are so minutely intermingled as each to lie in very intimate relationship to one another.

§34 Their opposite powers alternately conquer and become conquered until a state of equilibrium is reached which is uniform throughout the whole. It is this outcome that is called "the temperament."²

§35 Since the primary powers in the elements are four in number (namely: heat, cold, moisture, dryness), it is evident that the temperaments in bodies undergoing generation and destruction accord with these powers.

§36 A simple, rational classification is of two types: (a) Equable or balanced. Here the contrary qualities are present to exactly equal degrees of potency—neither of them being in excess or deficiency. This temperament has a quality which is exactly the mean between the two extremes. (b) Inequable or unbalanced. Here the quality of the temperament is not an exquisitely exact mean between the two contraries, but tends a little more to one than to the other. For example, to hot more than to cold; to moist more than to dry; or contrariwise.³

[...]

LECTURE 4: THE HUMORS

4.1. THE NATURE OF THE HUMORS AND THEIR TYPES

4.1.1. THE NATURE OF THE HUMORS

§73 Humor (*akhlāt*)¹ or body-fluid is that fluid, moist, physical substance into which our aliment is transformed. That part of the aliment which has the capacity to be transformed into body substance, either by itself or in combination with something else thereby being capable of assimilation by the members or organs, and completely integrated into the tissues, is the healthy or good humor. It is what replaces the loss which the body substance undergoes.²

§74 The residue from this process, the "superfluity," is called unhealthy or abnormal humor. It is the fluid which, in the absence of proper digestion or conversion, is unsuitable for assimilation and is therefore eliminated from the body.³

§75 Body fluids may be primary or secondary. Primary fluids are the sanguineous humor (blood), the serous humor (phlegm), the bilious humor (yellow bile) and the atrabilious humor (black bile). Secondary fluids of the body are either non-excrements or excrements. The non-excrements have not yet been subjected to any action by any of the simple organs and they are not changed until they reach the destined tissues.

B. A first definition: Melancholy as an excess of black bile

11.9.4. BLACK BILE (MELANCHOLY)

§1066 The characteristic signs of this condition are dry and dark skin, thick and dark blood, presence of anxiety, burning in the epigastrium, false appetite, turbid urine of a blue, dark or red color, dark complexion and excessive hair. If the complexion is pale and the hair scanty, there is seldom any excess of black bile. Patches of pigmentation, chronic indolent ulcers and diseases of the spleen also indicate excess of black bile. Age, temperament, habits, residence, occupation and history of previous treatments are also helpful in the diagnosis. Dreams are usually full of anxiety and often of dark places, dark trenches and dark fearful objects.

C. External causes of sadness

7.3. THE COMMON EMOTIONS IN RELATION TO THE VITAL BREATH: THEIR FIRST CAUSES: POTENTIALITY AND DISPOSITION

§500 Sages and those physicians who agree with them, are satisfied that joy and sadness, fear and anger, are passions peculiarly; related to the breath of the heart. Each of these emotions is maintained or discontinued: (1) by the agent [in the scholastic sense]; (2) by the persistence or cessation of the disposition exhibited by the substance of the patient.

[...]

§513 When the breath is scanty (as occurs in convalescents, in long-standing illnesses, and in elderly persons); when it is not balanced in character (as in morbid states); and when it is: (a) very dense and coarse in substance (as in melancholy and elderly people), it cannot arouse joy; (b) very delicate in substance (as in convalescents and in women), it will not allow of expansion; and (c) confused (as in melancholy people). In all these cases there is a very strong tendency to depression, sadness and grief.⁷

7.3.2. THE EXTERNAL CAUSES OF DELIGHT AND SADNESS

§514 When all the conditions required for a given act are present, the slightest agent will now suffice to effect the act. Thus, when sulphur is used for kindling, it is because sulphur is set afire by a moderate amount of heat, whereas wood cannot be made to burn without twice as much. So, when the mind has a breath whose tendency to receive the impress of gladdening agents is complete, a slight agent will suffice to evoke gladness.

[...]

If two agents usually having a gladdening effect occur together the effect is not so much the greater. All that happens is that the disposition is more drawn to one than the other. The effect of one only overrules that of the other if the agent in question be very powerful, or, if it be weak, only if it be very persistently at work (see §1041). This accounts for delight being able to persist during the state of inebriation, and for the fact that melancholy persons with confused breaths keep sad after agencies producing a sense of desolation and sadness—such as the following: (1) reflecting that one's homeland is distant; (2) pondering over many injuries already past and done with; (3) hate and rancor; (4) bad health; (5) difficult circumstances of life; (6) thinking terrible things are going to happen in the future; (7) thinking of the necessity for death, which natural judgment ignores because of the obvious fact—that we must die; (8) thinking about something that it is disturbing to meditate upon; (9) being away from an agreeable occupation; (10) having thoughts that distract from one's occupation; (11) distraction from that which is desired for and wished for; (12) many other similar things, and others which are beyond comprehension. Things of this sort easily sadden a mind which is disposed to become sad. Moreover, in melancholy persons the vividness of the imagination of depressing things itself causes (them to appear, because the thing whose image is represented to the mind is already there in actuality. Hence depression persists.

D. The pathology, symptoms and treatments of the various types of melancholy

SECTION 8: ON MANIA (DELIRIUM FURIBUNDUM OR FURIOUS MANIA) AND DOG DISEASE (A KIND OF MANIA)

What is mania? It is a kind of madness. Dog disease is a type of this disease, but it is an angry condition. It is harmful because the person thinks he is right that we see this action in dogs.

This madness is from the matter that causes melancholy. Both of them are caused by black bile. The difference is that the cause for mania is black bile humoral matter or burnt yellow bile or burnt black bile. It is the worst condition if it is burnt black bile. The cause of melancholy is natural black bile that is present in the passageways, or the matter may be burnt, but it is burnt phlegmatic or clear burnt blood (sanguine humour). It happens less that burnt phlegm causes madness even though melancholy might be from burnt phlegm.

Melancholy usually comes from the formation of black bile matter in the empty passageways, but mania disease usually comes from black bile humoral matter located in the front part of the brain.

Suspicion, corrupted thoughts and fear are aspects of melancholy disease. There is no extreme anxiety there.

With mania disease, there is always anxiety, activity, moodiness and a beastly attitude. The patient has the look of wild beast.

[...]

SECTION 9: ON PSYCHOSIS (PARANOIA) AND MELANCHOLIA

This is a disease in which thinking and imagination depart, the natural way becomes corrupted and fear dominates. Black bile temperament is so sick in melancholia that it scars the brain's vital spirit from the inside. The external world seems like a frightening darkness because cold and dry temperament is opposed to the vital energy, and the vital energy becomes weak from it. Hot and moist temperament such as the temperament of Wine is compatible with the vital energy and strengthens it. If melancholy is not treated and the patient stays in depression and sadness, melancholia will finally turn to mania.

[...]

Any type of black bile that reaches a specific location of the brain can definitely lead to melancholia. But some of these kinds bring mania with melancholia.

The least dangerous melancholia is the one that is from dark blood. With this kind of melancholia, the patient retains his happiness.

It often happens that a patient develops hemorrhoids or elephantiasis and his melancholia goes away.

Melancholia occurs more in men, but when it occurs in women, it is more severe.

The elderly develop this disease more. Melancholia occurs less in winter and more in the summer and the fall.

Melancholia occurs more in the spring. The spring stimulates the humours. It causes melancholia and sometimes it might be the spring that stimulates black bile.

When people who have the ability to develop melancholia face fear or sadness or too much sleeplessness, or there is an obstruction in the normal

blood flow or vomiting or black bile matter, they come close to having melancholia.

A. ON THE SIGNS OF MELANCHOLIA

The primary signs of melancholia are: bad thoughts, fear without reason, being sensitive, feeling lonely and isolated, jumping of organs, vertigo, sounds and especially in the outer layer of the peritoneum.

When it passes the first level and becomes more stable, the patient's condition will cause him to avoid people. He will be very suspicious and sad and hate people, and will be depressed and speak with distress. His sexual desire is due to too much gas. He will have all kinds of fear, fear of things that are present and things that are not present. Usually it is fear of things that are not scary.

Melancholy patients are scared that the sky will fall on them; or that the ground will swallow them; or they are scared of the jinn, or of a thief. Some of them think that a fierce animal will kill them and this fear might be from something in the past. Sometimes they think they see things, but they do not. Their thoughts and imagination are filled with the idea of becoming a king or a fierce animal or a devil or a bird.

Some of them have bloody melancholia. They laugh more because they imagine good and happy things in their thoughts. The ones who have pure black bile melancholia cry more. Some of them want to die and some of them are scared of death.

If melancholia is specific to the brain, its signs are: thinking too much, too much temptation, which is lasting, staring at something for a long time, staring at the floor. You can guess that the disease is specific to the brain.

Also, if the patient suffers from sleeplessness, too much thinking and sunburn before getting the disease, these are signs that the disease is specific to the brain; or he might have a history of brain disease.

Another reason for melancholia specific to the brain is that the signs of disease become present in others organs that are connected with the brain. We will mention them. This possibility is especially to be considered if we treat that organ and there is no benefit or the symptoms of the disease are very dangerous.

[...]

We say that if the black bile that causes melancholia is bloody, the patient is happy and smiling. He does not have much sadness. If it is with phlegm, he is lazy and with less activity and calm. If it is from yellow bile, he is anxious and he reaches the first stage of madness. His disease looks like mania. If it is only pure black bile, he thinks too much and he moves less unless he is moved so that he becomes very distressed and vengeful.

B. ON THE TREATMENT OF MELANCHOLIA

When melancholy is at the first level, its treatment is easy, but if it becomes chronic, it is difficult to treat. You need to keep the patient happy. He should live in a moderate location that is moist. Put aromatic plants in his room. He should smell aromatic oils. He should eat good chymus foods that are very moisturizing. He should get used to bathing and have good foods before meals. He should pour warm water that is not too hot on his head. When he comes out of the bath and he feels thirsty, he should drink some water. Do a massage that is strengthening to the body. This has been mentioned in *The Canon of Medicine*, Volume 1.

Use moisturizing things as much as possible, more than warming things with him. He should avoid sexual intercourse. Do not let him sweat a lot. He should avoid eating broad beans, dry meat, lentils, cabbage, fresh thick wine and whatever is salted, whatever is salty and pungent tasting and whatever is very sour tasting. He should eat oily and sweet things. If you want him to sleep, rub his head with Poppy Seed Water, Camomile and Feverfew. Sleeping is the best treatment. Whenever you use Poppy Seed, uses medicines with it that counteract its harmfulness.

If a patient's melancholia is from a very cold and dry imbalanced temperament, you need to try to warm his heart and use "happiness-causing" medications. Prescribe Musk and Mithridates Medicinal Paste. Treat the patient's head with medications that we have mentioned in treating levity and weakness of the brain.

[...]

A patient with melancholia should have a hobby, anything. People that he respects and likes should be with him. He should take some White Wine mixed with water. He should listen to happy music.

Staying lonely and isolated is worse than anything else for these patients. Melancholic patients are usually sad because of their symptoms; or they are scared of something and they cannot talk because of this fear. The main treatment of this disease is to stop the patient from thinking too much.

[...]

SECTION 10: ON LYCANTHROPY AND ITS TREATMENT

There is a type of melancholic disease that usually occurs in the second month of winter. A person with this disease hates all living things and he avoids them. He goes to cemeteries and attacks people who surprise him. He is awake at night and hides himself during the day. He does not want to see anyone. He does not rest and remain anywhere for an hour. He also moves and walks. He does not even know where he goes and why he goes. He avoids people, but he is very harmless. He is moody. He is sad. He has a yellow color and dry tongue, is thirsty and there are ulcers on his shins that do not heal. The cause of ulcers is the corruption of black bile matter and so much movement of his legs that the materials come down to his shins. These situations lead to dropping of materials to his shins, causing ulcers. Because the causes remain present and materials are not broken off, the ulcers do not heal.

[...]

SECTION 11: ON OBSESSION (SCRUPULOSITY): A MELANCHOLIC DISEASE

Scrupulosity disease is similar to melancholia. The cause of it is that patient keeps his thought busy with forms and images. He is occupied with his imaginings and desires. This may not help, but the continuous focusing of his thoughts is the cause.

A. ON THE SIGNS OF OBSESSION (SCRUPULOSITY)

Signs are sunken eyes, dryness of eyes and lack of tears when he cries. His eyelids come together continuously and fast. He laughs a lot and he looks like he is looking at something enjoyable or he is hearing some good news, or he makes jokes.

His breath is very separated and fast. He sighs loudly. Sometimes he begins to cry in the middle of laughing, especially when hearing lovely poems. If the poem is about separation and distance from his obsession, he will be greatly affected. All of his organs are moist except his eyes, which are dry. They are sunken. His eyelids are large and thick from sleeplessness. His sighing has affected his head. He does not have an organized shape or form. His pulse is variable. It is like the pulse of a person who is extremely melancholic (that is, it is irregular). It changes from one time to another.

You can know with whom he is obsessed from this change in his pulse even if he does not mention the person's name.

[...]

We saw an obsessed person who kept getting thinner and thinner. He became depressed. He developed many difficult and bad diseases. He developed long-term fevers. All of them were due to the weakening of his strength because of his obsession. But he finally attained what he was obsessed about. I visited him after a short time. I saw wonderful things. He gained weight. He regained his lost strength. I found that his temperament was based on his emotions.

B. ON THE TREATMENT OF OBSESSION (SCRUPULOSITY)

Examine the patient. Check if there is any sign of burning of humour. If there is, cleanse it and take care of the moisturizing of the patient and of his sleeping. He should eat good food. Give him warming-propriety medications, but necessary moisture should not decrease. Do something so that he will be busy with quarreling and struggling with other people so that he might get rid of the disease's cause; or do something so that he becomes obsessed with someone or something else so he can forget about his first obsession. This is helpful when the obsession is not yet very stable. If he is obsessed by a wise person, advise and counsel from one side and deride and reproach him from another side. Explain that his obsession is a form of madness. This may be helpful. Conversation is helpful here; or have an older woman surround him and begin saying bad things about his obsession. He should say things about her so that he will come to dislike her.