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Mania and melancholy: some Stoic texts on insanity

All readers of Stoic material are familiar with the deliberately provocative claim that "all the non-wise are insane," and with descriptions of certain patterns in emotional experience as cases of *mania*. Much less well known, however, is a small group of texts which suggests that early Stoic psychology also offered an account of insanity more nearly akin to what we ourselves mean when we say a person is mentally ill. Among these are Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.11, Diogenes Laertius 7.118, 127, Sextus Empiricus, *AM* 7.57, 246.

The term *melancholia* for this second condition suggests that mental illness is essentially an imbalance of humors, caused perhaps by physical agents such as hellebore (compare D.L. 7.127, , Simplicius, *In Arist. Categ.* 102a = *SVF* 3.238). But *melancholia* also admits of a cognitive account, as a confusion among the impressions, and its causes may be episodes of extreme emotion. Whereas the ordinary imperfect human acts erratically because the beliefs on which her actions are based are often incorrect and contradictory, the actions of the melancholically insane do not admit of *any* reasoned justification, and are thus not properly said to be human actions at all. In the case of Ajax, for instance, an episode of extreme anger--itself a physical change, as are all mental events in Stoicism--must actually unstring that tension in the mind-material which renders him capable of human action. His sheep-slaughtering rampage is thus not an act for which he can be held morally responsible; it may, however, serve as a warning to others to seek a remedy for anger before it is too late.

In addition to its intrinsic interest, material studied in this paper provides valuable context for the study of a much-disputed passage in Seneca, *De Ira* 2.4. The "second movement" of which Seneca speaks in that passage is most naturally understood to be anger itself; the "third movement," then, is likely to be melancholic insanity as described in *Ira* 2.5. Seneca's orthodoxy has been challenged on this as on several other points in Stoic moral psychology; on this point, however, his witness can be rendered compatible with that of other sources.