

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *On Physiognomy; Against the Physiognomists: For the Promotion of Human Knowledge and the Love of Humanity* (1778)

Abstract

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99) was an experimental physicist and aphorist in Göttingen. He was known for both his electrical experiments and his posthumously published *Aphorisms*. In his reply to Johann Caspar Lavater, he decries the spread of physiognomy as a fashionable superstitious practice in which we “read the stars” in people's foreheads. Lichtenberg distinguishes between physiognomy (as a reductive attempt to link character and behavior to physical features) and pathognomy, the study of affect, emotion, and expression. The latter, he maintains, has some validity, as it preserves a role for human will and understanding.

Source

On Physiognomy

Certainly, the liberty of our thoughts and the most private excitations of our hearts have never stood on a weaker footing than now, when the industry, the number, and the courage of the heroes who revolt against them make their imminent collapse foreseeable. From all sides, these invaders storm the most vulnerable fortifications, and everywhere else secret stockpiles are suspected, with a zeal that more resembles a Gothic or Vandal onslaught than a premeditated siege; and many maintain that formal surrender simply cannot be long in coming. But there is also a good number of less sanguine people who think that the soul still lies over its most secret treasure, as inviolably safe as millennia ago, and who smile at the increasingly Babylonian constructions of their haughty besiegers, convinced that, long before these works' completion, the workers' languages will grow confused, and master and apprentice will part ways.

The matter under discussion here is physiognomy, and the above-mentioned factions form no small part of the good society of our fatherland. The principles of both warrant some scattered observations in a pocket diary. According to the first faction, physiognomy is epoch-making, world-transforming; and according to the second, it can be useful for the year 1778 when one is at the toilet.

The author is not of the besieging faction, and so one may not expect any formal instruction in physiognomy in the following essay. At this time, instruction, in fact, is no longer as necessary as the warning to seek it in the familiar places with caution and even with mistrust; and this warning comprises the essay's whole contents. For it is uncertain at the very least whether physiognomy, even its greatest perfection, will ever promote a love of humanity: but it is certain that powerful, popular, and thereby active bunglers in this discipline will be able to endanger society. However, the author has as little intent as he has ability to hinder all seeking of physiognomic ground rules; and far be it from him to oppose efforts that perhaps, like attempts to find the philosopher's stone, can lead to things more useful than their goal, that is to say in these sad days of false sensitivity, can arouse the spirit of observation, lead to self-knowledge, and prepare one for the arts.

In order to circumvent old misunderstandings and prevent new ones, at this moment we would like to state once and for all that we take the word “physiognomy” in a limited sense, and understand it as the facility to identify, from the form and constitution of external parts of the human body, chiefly the face, exclusive of all temporary signs of emotions, the constitution of the mind and the heart; conversely, the entire semiotics of affects or knowledge of the natural signs of emotions in all their gradations and mixtures is called “pathognomy.” The latter word has already been suggested for this use. It will not be necessary here to create a new word that assimilates both meanings, or better, to find another word for the first meaning and then adopt “physiognomy” as the general term, as now is customary, and as the term is accordingly also used in this essay’s title.

No one will deny that in a world in which everything is related through cause and effect, and where nothing occurs because of miracles, every part is a mirror of the whole. When a pea is shot into the Mediterranean Sea, a sharper eye than our own, but yet infinitely duller than the eye of the One who sees everything, could perceive the effect of this action on the coast of China. And what is the difference between the pea and a particle of light that strikes the retina of the eye in relation to the mass of the brain and its branches? This often places us in a position of inferring from the near to the far, from the visible to the invisible, from the present to the past and future. Thus the cuts in the bottom of a tin plate tell the history of all the mealtimes that it has witnessed; and likewise, the form of every area of land, the form of its dunes and crags, contains in natural writing the history of the earth. Indeed, every rounded pebble ejected from the vast ocean would tell the history of a soul that is as linked to it as our soul is linked to our brain. The fate of Rome also supposedly lay in the viscera of a slaughtered animal, but the charlatan who pretended to read it did not actually see it there. Hence, is the inner man indeed imprinted on the outer? On the face, of which we primarily intend to speak here, can be found signs and traces of our thoughts, tendencies, and capabilities. Aren’t the signs that climate and occupation impress upon the body as clear? And what is climate and occupation as compared with an ever active soul that lives and works in every fiber of the body? This absolute legibility, in a general sense, is doubted by no one. It is also not necessary to cite a quantity of examples, in which a thing’s interior may be deduced from its exterior, in order to prove that there is a physiognomy, as some writers have done. The proof is accomplished immediately when one says, our senses show us only surfaces and everything else is an inference. Thence follows nothing especially consolatory for physiognomy without a more exact definition, since precisely this surface reading is the source of our errors and in some cases comprises our entire ignorance. If the interior is imprinted on the exterior, is it therefore present for our eyes? And cannot traces of effects that we do not seek conceal and confuse those that we do seek? Thus an uncomprehended order of things ultimately becomes disorder, the effect of an unrecognizable cause becomes chance, and where there is too much to see, we see nothing. The present, says a great philosopher,^[1] impregnated by the past, gives birth to the future. But what a vain and wretched piecemeal thing is our science of weather. This is precisely our prophetic art! Despite the volumes of meteorological observations of entire academies, it is still as difficult to say in advance whether the sun will shine two days from now as it must have been several centuries ago to predict the splendor of the House of Hohenzollern. And yet the object of meteorology, as far as I know, is a simple machine whose driving mechanism we will be able to approach more closely in the course of time. There is no free being behind our changes in weather, no willful, jealous, enamored creature who, for the sake of a beloved, once drove the sun back to the Tropic of Cancer in the winter. If our bodies developed in the purest celestial air, modified only by the movements of their souls and disturbed by no external forces; and if our souls, in turn, adjusted themselves in the opposite direction with similar pliability according to the laws to which our bodies are subject: then the dominant passion and the eminent talent – I do not deny it – would bring forth different facial forms in various degrees and mixes, as different salts crystallize into different forms when they are not disturbed. But does our body belong to our soul alone, or is it instead a link intersected by lines, each law of which it must obey and each of which it must satisfy? Accordingly, every simple type of stone in its purest state has its own form; but the anomalies produced

through connection with others, and the accidents to which they are exposed, give rise to the situation that even the most practiced often err when attempting to distinguish them by sight. Thus our body stands at the midpoint between the soul and the rest of world, and is a mirror to the effects of each. It narrates not only our inclinations and talents, but also the whiplashes of fate, climate, illness, nutrition, and a thousand misfortunes, to which not always only our own bad decisions, but often chance, and often obligation, expose us. Are all the flaws that I notice in a wax sculpture due to the artist's mistakes, or are they not also the effects of ungraceful handling, the heat of the sun, or a warm room? In this regard, the extreme pliability of the body, its perfectibility and corruptibility, whose limits are unknown, comes to the assistance of chance. The wrinkles that form in one person's skin after a thousand repetitions of the same movement show themselves in another person's skin after fewer of the same; what causes a distortion and growth on one person that even dogs notice, produces no visible sign on another, at least not as can be detected by the human eye. This shows how pliant everything is, and how a small spark makes the whole go up in flames, while elsewhere it scarcely leaves a scorch mark. Does everything in the face then relate to the head and heart? Why do you not construe birth month, a cold winter, dirty diapers, careless nurses, damp bedrooms, and childhood illnesses from the shapes of noses? What acts on color in the man, acts on form in the child; green wood warps by the fire, where dry wood simply turns brown. This is presumably the reason for the more regular facial features of the noble and great, who certainly possess no advantages of mind or heart that we could not also achieve. Or is an accident of the soul the same as that of a wet nurse, and does the soul become contorted following the contortion of its body, so that it now would build precisely such a body if it got another body to build? How? Or does the soul fill the body in the manner of an elastic fluid, which always takes the form of the vessel, so that if a flat nose means *schadenfreude*, a man will experience *schadenfreude* if someone presses his nose flat? This is a crude example but it was chosen with care. In our body itself and the body's juices lie a hundred sources of equally observable but less violent changes. Furthermore, you do not deny that a person is capable of becoming better or worse long after the parts of his body take permanent form. But does a smooth forehead become covered with a layer of flesh, or does it cave in, when memory disappears? Many a clever bloke has fallen on his head and become a fool, and I remember having read in the proceedings of the Parisian Academy that there a fool once fell on his head and became clever. In both cases, I wished to see the silhouette of the predecessor next to the silhouette of the successor in order to compare the lips and eye sockets of each. These examples are admittedly cherry-picked. But do you want to determine where violence begins and illness ends? The bridge that connects the two trains of thought can collapse as easily when I catch a cold as when I fall on my head, and in the end being a man would amount to being sick. In my life, I have witnessed around eight dissections of the human brain, and in at least five, wrong conclusions were drawn out like red threads, and lapses in memory [were grasped] like grains of sand. So already from this (there is more to come below), one sees how careless it is to infer similar characters from similar faces, even if this similarity is complete. But who is the judge of them? A decrepit mind whose impression is so easily weakened and distorted by anticipatory conclusions and associated ideas [make] it almost impossible to separate judgment from sensation, even in cases much simpler than this one, where no passions come into play, and even after proven errors.

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[1] [¶] Leibnitz.

Menschenliebe und Menschenerkenntniß. Göttingen: bey Johann Christian Dieterich, 1778, pp. 21–32. Available online at <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10255391-2>

Translation: Elizabeth Tucker

Recommended Citation: Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, On Physiognomy; Against the Physiognomists: For the Promotion of Human Knowledge and the Love of Humanity (1778), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-19>> [July 05, 2025].