

Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomic Fragments. To Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind* (1775)

Abstract

Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) was a Swiss pastor and the author of numerous devotional and mystical writings, in addition to patriotic poetry. The practice of judging individual character based on external anatomical features had its roots in ancient Greece and was revived by Lavater's work. He boasted that his lavishly illustrated *Physiognomic Fragments* [*Physiognomische Fragmenten*], the most expensive book produced to date (according to him), was not for the common man. The work prompted a flood of responses—praise, as well as criticism and ridicule. Fragmentary indeed, the work hardly offers a coherent theory of physiognomy.

Source

Second Fragment.

On Physiognomics

Inasmuch as this word appears so frequently in this text, I need to state above all what I mean by it: namely, **the ability to recognize the inner nature of a person based on his external appearance**; to perceive by means of some kind of natural expression that which does not directly reveal itself to the senses. Insofar as I speak of physiognomics as a science, I understand by physiognomy all **direct** manifestations of the person. All traits, contours, all passive and active movements, all poses and postures of the human body; everything whereby the suffering or active human being can be directly observed, whereby he reveals his **person**—this is the subject of physiognomy.

In the broadest sense, human **physiognomy** is for me the external, the **surface** of man at rest or in motion, whether in the flesh or in some kind of representation. **Physiognomics** is the knowledge, the understanding of the relationship between the external and the internal; between the visible surface and the invisible content; between what is **visible** and perceptibly **animated** and what **animates invisibly** and imperceptibly; between the visible effect and the invisible force.

In the narrower sense, **physiognomy** is the **shape of the face**, and **physiognomics** is the understanding of the facial features and their meaning.

Now, since man has so many different sides, each of which can be separately observed and evaluated, all kinds of **physiognomies** arise—many **physiognomics**.

For example, one can look specifically at the **formation** of the person—the proportions, the contour, the harmony of his limbs, his shape—according to a certain ideal of regularity, beauty, perfection. And the ability to judge these correctly, and to use this assessment to make a judgment about his basic character, shall be called **fundamental physiognomics**; or, if it were not a discordant and awkward expression, **physiological physiognomics**.

Through dissection it is possible to turn parts of the body into surfaces—certain inner parts can be separately

observed, either through their external terminuses or by opening up the body. The ability to infer from these **externalities** certain internal conditions, that would be **anatomical physiognomics**; it concerns itself with the observation and evaluation of bones and skeletons, muscles, entrails, glands, arteries and vessels, nerves, and the ligaments of skeletons.

One can, in turn, observe in particular the mixture of blood, the constitution, warmth, coldness, the ungainliness or delicacy, the moistness, dryness, flexibility, and irritability of a person: and one could call the ability to make such observations and infer from them judgments about his character **temperamental physiognomics**.

Medical physiognomics would be the type that concerns itself with the study of the signs of health and illness in the human body.

Moral physiognomics infers, from external signs, man's sentiments and powers to do good or evil, or to suffer.

Intellectual physiognomics concerns itself with man's mental powers, insofar as they are discernible through his education, shape, color, movements—in short, through his entire external appearance.

There are as many kinds of physiognomics as there are different, specific sides of man.

Whoever forms the right judgement of a man's character based on the mere first impressions made by his exterior is a **natural** physiognomist; whoever can accurately define and order the exterior traits that constitute his **character** is a **scientific** physiognomist; a **philosophical** physiognomist is he who is able to define the **reasons** behind the traits and expressions so specified, the **inner causes** behind these **external effects**.

The little that has been said so far illuminates how endlessly broad **physiognomics** is, and how difficult it is to be a **complete physiognomist**.

I believe it is impossible that a person could become such. Happy is he who knows only one side of man in such a way as is useful to him and human society.

It is not the work of one man, of one academy, of one century to write a physiognomics.

Addition.

There will be many occasions when one cannot avoid using the words physiognomy, physiognomics, in a very broad sense. This science infers the internal from the external. But what is the external of man? Surely not his naked form, unthinking gestures, which denote his inner forces and their play! Status, custom, possessions, clothes, everything modifies, everything conceals him. It seems exceedingly difficult—indeed, impossible—to penetrate through all these layers to his innermost interior, to find even in these foreign distinctions fixed points from which his nature can be securely inferred. Take heart! What surrounds man not only exerts its effect on him, he also affects the same in return, and by allowing himself to be modified, he in turn modifies what surrounds him. Thus, a man's clothes and household effects permit certain inferences about his character. Nature shapes man, he reshapes himself, and this reshaping is yet again natural; he who sees himself set within the great wide world fences and walls off a small one within, and he furnishes it according to his image.

Status and circumstances may always determine what surrounds man, but the manner in which he allows himself to be defined is of utmost importance. He can set himself up indifferently like others of his kind, because that is simply what is done; this indifference can rise to the level of negligence. In the same manner one can take note of punctuality and zeal, also whether he reaches forward and seeks to make himself equal to the next step above him,

or whether—which is, of course, exceedingly rare—he seems to be falling back one step. I hope that nobody will hold it against me that I expand the field of the physiognomist thusly. Every relationship of man is partly his concern, and his endeavor is partly so difficult that one must not blame him if he seizes upon everything that can lead him more quickly and more easily to his great goal.

Source: Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente. Zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe*: Vol. 1. Leipzig and Winterthur: Bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich, und Heinrich Steiner und Compagnie, 1775, pp. 13–16. Available online at:

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