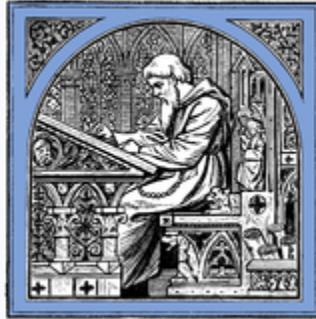


# **On Physiognomy**

**Arthur Schopenhauer**



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That the outer man is a picture of the inner, and the face an expression and revelation of the whole character, is a presumption likely enough in itself, and therefore a safe one to go by; evidenced as it is by the fact that people are always anxious to see anyone who has made himself famous by good or evil, or as the author of some extraordinary work; or if they cannot get a sight of him, to hear at any rate from others what he looks like. So people go to places where they may expect to see the person who interests them; the press, especially in England, endeavors to give a minute and striking description of his appearance; painters and engravers lose no time in putting him visibly before us; and finally photography, on that very account of such high value, affords the most complete satisfaction of our curiosity. It is also a fact that in private life everyone criticises the physiognomy of those he comes across, first of all secretly trying to discern their intellectual and moral character from their features. This would be a useless proceeding if, as some foolish people fancy, the exterior of a man is a matter of no account; if, as they think, the soul is one thing and the body another, and the body related to the soul merely as the coat to the man himself.

On the contrary, every human face is a hieroglyphic, and a hieroglyphic, too, which admits of being deciphered, the alphabet of which we carry about with us already perfected. As a matter of fact, the face of a man gives us a fuller and more interesting information than his tongue; for his face is

the compendium of all he will ever say, as it is the one record of all his thoughts and endeavors. And, moreover, the tongue tells the thought of one man only, whereas the face expresses a thought of nature itself: so that everyone is worth attentive observation, even though everyone may not be worth talking to. And if every individual is worth observation as a single thought of nature, how much more so is beauty, since it is a higher and more general conception of nature, is, in fact, her thought of a species. This is why beauty is so captivating: it is a fundamental thought of nature: whereas the individual is only a by-thought, a corollary.

In private, people always proceed upon the principle that a man is what he looks; and the principle is a right one, only the difficulty lies in its application. For though the art of applying the principle is partly innate and may be partly gained by experience, no one is a master of it, and even the most experienced is not infallible. But for all that, whatever Figaro may say, it is not the face which deceives; it is we who deceive ourselves in reading in it what is not there.

The deciphering of a face is certainly a great and difficult art, and the principles of it can never be learnt in the abstract. The first condition of success is to maintain a purely objective point of view, which is no easy matter. For, as soon as the faintest trace of anything subjective is present, whether dislike or favor, or fear or hope, or even the thought of the impression we ourselves are making upon

the object of our attention the characters we are trying to decipher become confused and corrupt. The sound of a language is really appreciated only by one who does not understand it, and that because, in thinking of the signification of a word, we pay no regard to the sign itself. So, in the same way, a physiognomy is correctly gauged only by one to whom it is still strange, who has not grown accustomed to the face by constantly meeting and conversing with the man himself. It is, therefore, strictly speaking, only the first sight of a man which affords that purely objective view which is necessary for deciphering his features. An odor affects us only when we first come in contact with it, and the first glass of wine is the one which gives us its true taste: in the same way, it is only at the first encounter that a face makes its full impression upon us. Consequently the first impression should be carefully attended to and noted, even written down if the subject of it is of personal importance, provided, of course, that one can trust one's own sense of physiognomy. Subsequent acquaintance and intercourse will obliterate the impression, but time will one day prove whether it is true.

Let us, however, not conceal from ourselves the fact that this first impression is for the most part extremely unedifying. How poor most faces are! With the exception of those that are beautiful, good-natured, or intellectual, that is to say, the very few and far between, I believe a person of any fine feeling scarcely ever sees a new face without a sensation akin to a shock, for the reason that it presents a

new and surprising combination of unedifying elements. To tell the truth, it is, as a rule, a sorry sight. There are some people whose faces bear the stamp of such artless vulgarity and baseness of character, such an animal limitation of intelligence, that one wonders how they can appear in public with such a countenance, instead of wearing a mask. There are faces, indeed, the very sight of which produces a feeling of pollution. One cannot, therefore, take it amiss of people, whose privileged position admits of it, if they manage to live in retirement and completely free from the painful sensation of "seeing new faces." The metaphysical explanation of this circumstance rests upon the consideration that the individuality of a man is precisely that by the very existence of which he should be reclaimed and corrected. If, on the other hand, a psychological explanation is satisfactory, let any one ask himself what kind of physiognomy he may expect in those who have all their life long, except on the rarest occasions, harbored nothing but petty, base and miserable thoughts, and vulgar, selfish, envious, wicked and malicious desires. Every one of these thoughts and desires has set its mark upon the face during the time it lasted, and by constant repetition, all these marks have in course of time become furrows and blotches, so to speak. Consequently, most people's appearance is such as to produce a shock at first sight; and it is only gradually that one gets accustomed to it, that is to say, becomes so deadened to the impression that it has no more effect on one.

And that the prevailing facial expression is the result of a long process of innumerable, fleeting and characteristic contractions of the features is just the reason why intellectual countenances are of gradual formation. It is, indeed, only in old age that intellectual men attain their sublime expression, whilst portraits of them in their youth show only the first traces of it. But on the other hand, what I have just said about the shock which the first sight of a face generally produces, is in keeping with the remark that it is only at that first sight that it makes its true and full impression. For to get a purely objective and uncorrupted impression of it, we must stand in no kind of relation to the person; if possible, we must not yet have spoken with him. For every conversation places us to some extent upon a friendly footing, establishes a certain *\_rapport\_*, a mutual subjective relation, which is at once unfavorable to an objective point of view. And as everyone's endeavor is to win esteem or friendship for himself, the man who is under observation will at once employ all those arts of dissimulation in which he is already versed, and corrupt us with his airs, hypocrisies and flatteries; so that what the first look clearly showed will soon be seen by us no more.

This fact is at the bottom of the saying that "most people gain by further acquaintance"; it ought, however, to run, "delude us by it." It is only when, later on, the bad qualities manifest themselves, that our first judgment as a rule receives its justification and makes good its scornful verdict. It may be that "a further acquaintance" is an

unfriendly one, and if that is so, we do not find in this case either that people gain by it. Another reason why people apparently gain on a nearer acquaintance is that the man whose first aspect warns us from him, as soon as we converse with him, no longer shows his own being and character, but also his education; that is, not only what he really is by nature, but also what he has appropriated to himself out of the common wealth of mankind. Three-fourths of what he says belongs not to him, but to the sources from which he obtained it; so that we are often surprised to hear a minotaur speak so humanly. If we make a still closer acquaintance, the animal nature, of which his face gave promise, will manifest itself "in all its splendor." If one is gifted with an acute sense for physiognomy, one should take special note of those verdicts which preceded a closer acquaintance and were therefore genuine. For the face of a man is the exact impression of what he is; and if he deceives us, that is our fault, not his. What a man says, on the other hand, is what he thinks, more often what he has learned, or it may be even, what he pretends to think. And besides this, when we talk to him, or even hear him talking to others, we pay no attention to his physiognomy proper. It is the underlying substance, the fundamental *\_datum\_*, and we disregard it; what interests us is its pathognomy, its play of feature during conversation. This, however, is so arranged as to turn the good side upwards.

When Socrates said to a young man who was introduced to him to have his capabilities tested, "Talk in order that I may

see you," if indeed by "seeing" he did not simply mean "hearing," he was right, so far as it is only in conversation that the features and especially the eyes become animated, and the intellectual resources and capacities set their mark upon the countenance. This puts us in a position to form a provisional notion of the degree and capacity of intelligence; which was in that case Socrates' aim. But in this connection it is to be observed, firstly, that the rule does not apply to moral qualities, which lie deeper, and in the second place, that what from an objective point of view we gain by the clearer development of the countenance in conversation, we lose from a subjective standpoint on account of the personal relation into which the speaker at once enters in regard to us, and which produces a slight fascination, so that, as explained above, we are not left impartial observers. Consequently from the last point of view we might say with greater accuracy, "Do not speak in order that I may see you."

For to get a pure and fundamental conception of a man's physiognomy, we must observe him when he is alone and left to himself. Society of any kind and conversation throw a reflection upon him which is not his own, generally to his advantage; as he is thereby placed in a state of action and reaction which sets him off. But alone and left to himself, plunged in the depths of his own thoughts and sensations, he is wholly himself, and a penetrating eye for physiognomy can at one glance take a general view of his entire character. For his face, looked at by and in itself,

expresses the keynote of all his thoughts and endeavors, the \_arret irrevocable\_, the irrevocable decree of his destiny, the consciousness of which only comes to him when he is alone.

The study of physiognomy is one of the chief means of a knowledge of mankind, because the cast of a man's face is the only sphere in which his arts of dissimulation are of no avail, since these arts extended only to that play of feature which is akin to mimicry. And that is why I recommend such a study to be undertaken when the subject of it is alone and given up to his own thoughts, and before he is spoken to: and this partly for the reason that it is only in such a condition that inspection of the physiognomy pure and simple is possible, because conversation at once lets in a pathognomical element, in which a man can apply the arts of dissimulation which he has learned: partly again because personal contact, even of the very slightest kind, gives a certain bias and so corrupts the judgment of the observer.

And in regard to the study of physiognomy in general, it is further to be observed that intellectual capacity is much easier of discernment than moral character. The former naturally takes a much more outward direction, and expresses itself not only in the face and the play of feature, but also in the gait, down even to the very slightest movement. One could perhaps discriminate from behind between a blockhead, a fool and a man of genius. The blockhead would be discerned by the torpidity and

sluggishness of all his movements: folly sets its mark upon every gesture, and so does intellect and a studious nature. Hence that remark of La Bruyere that there is nothing so slight, so simple or imperceptible but that our way of doing it enters in and betrays us: a fool neither comes nor goes, nor sits down, nor gets up, nor holds his tongue, nor moves about in the same way as an intelligent man. (And this is, be it observed by way of parenthesis, the explanation of that sure and certain instinct which, according to Helvetius, ordinary folk possess of discerning people of genius, and of getting out of their way.)

The chief reason for this is that, the larger and more developed the brain, and the thinner, in relation to it, the spine and nerves, the greater is the intellect; and not the intellect alone, but at the same time the mobility and pliancy of all the limbs; because the brain controls them more immediately and resolutely; so that everything hangs more upon a single thread, every movement of which gives a precise expression to its purpose.

This is analogous to, nay, is immediately connected with the fact that the higher an animal stands in the scale of development, the easier it becomes to kill it by wounding a single spot. Take, for example, batrachia: they are slow, cumbrous and sluggish in their movements; they are unintelligent, and, at the same time, extremely tenacious of life; the reason of which is that, with a very small brain, their spine and nerves are very thick. Now gait and

movement of the arms are mainly functions of the brain; our limbs receive their motion and every little modification of it from the brain through the medium of the spine.

This is why conscious movements fatigue us: the sensation of fatigue, like that of pain, has its seat in the brain, not, as people commonly suppose, in the limbs themselves; hence motion induces sleep.

On the other hand those motions which are not excited by the brain, that is, the unconscious movements of organic life, of the heart, of the lungs, etc., go on in their course without producing fatigue. And as thought, equally with motion, is a function of the brain, the character of the brain's activity is expressed equally in both, according to the constitution of the individual; stupid people move like lay-figures, while every joint of an intelligent man is eloquent.

But gesture and movement are not nearly so good an index of intellectual qualities as the face, the shape and size of the brain, the contraction and movement of the features, and above all the eye,--from the small, dull, dead-looking eye of a pig up through all gradations to the irradiating, flashing eyes of a genius.

The look of good sense and prudence, even of the best kind, differs from that of genius, in that the former bears the

stamp of subjection to the will, while the latter is free from it.

And therefore one can well believe the anecdote told by Squarzafighi in his life of Petrarch, and taken from Joseph Brivius, a contemporary of the poet, how once at the court of the Visconti, when Petrarch and other noblemen and gentlemen were present, Galeazzo Visconti told his son, who was then a mere boy (he was afterwards first Duke of Milan), to pick out the wisest of the company; how the boy looked at them all for a little, and then took Petrarch by the hand and led him up to his father, to the great admiration of all present. For so clearly does nature set the mark of her dignity on the privileged among mankind that even a child can discern it.

Therefore, I should advise my sagacious countrymen, if ever again they wish to trumpet about for thirty years a very commonplace person as a great genius, not to choose for the purpose such a beerhouse-keeper physiognomy as was possessed by that philosopher, upon whose face nature had written, in her clearest characters, the familiar inscription, "commonplace person."

But what applies to intellectual capacity will not apply to moral qualities, to character. It is more difficult to discern its physiognomy, because, being of a metaphysical nature, it lies incomparably deeper.

It is true that moral character is also connected with the constitution, with the organism, but not so immediately or in such direct connection with definite parts of its system as is intellectual capacity.

Hence while everyone makes a show of his intelligence and endeavors to exhibit it at every opportunity, as something with which he is in general quite contented, few expose their moral qualities freely, and most people intentionally cover them up; and long practice makes the concealment perfect. In the meantime, as I explained above, wicked thoughts and worthless efforts gradually set their mask upon the face, especially the eyes. So that, judging by physiognomy, it is easy to warrant that a given man will never produce an immortal work; but not that he will never commit a great crime.

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