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Physiognomy

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by Rudolf Dircks

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Physiognomy.

That the outside reflects the inner man, and that the face expresses his whole character, is an obvious supposition and accordingly a safe one, demonstrated as it is in the desire people have to see on all occasions a man who has distinguished himself by something good or evil, or produced some exceptional work; or if this is denied them, at any rate to hear from others what he looks like. This is why, on the one hand, they go to places where they conjecture he is to be found; and on the other, why the press, and especially the English press, tries to describe him in a minute and striking way; he is soon brought visibly before us either by a painter or an engraver; and finally, photography, on that account so highly prized, meets this necessity in a most perfect way.

It is also proved in everyday life that each one inspects the physiognomy of those he comes in contact with, and first of all secretly tries to discover their moral and intellectual character from their features. This could not be the case if, as some foolish people state, the outward appearance of a man is of no importance; nay, if the soul is one thing and the body another, and the latter related to the soul as the coat is to the man himself.

Rather is every human face a hieroglyph, which, to be sure, admits of being deciphered — nay, the whole alphabet of which we carry about with us. Indeed, the face of a man, as a rule, bespeaks more interesting matter than his tongue, for it is the compendium of all which he will ever say, as it is the register of all his thoughts and aspirations. Moreover, the tongue only speaks the thoughts of one man, while the face expresses a thought of nature. Therefore it is worth while to observe everybody attentively; even if they are not worth talking to. Every individual is worthy of observation as a single thought of nature; so is beauty in the highest degree, for it is a higher and more general conception of nature: it is her thought of a species. This is why we are so captivated by beauty. It is a fundamental and principal thought of Nature; whereas the individual is only a secondary thought, a corollary.

In secret, everybody goes upon the principle that a man is what he looks; but the difficulty lies in its application. The ability to apply it is partly innate and partly acquired by experience; but no one understands it thoroughly, for even the most experienced may make a mistake. Still, it is not the face that deceives, whatever Figaro may say, but it is we who are deceived in reading what is not there. The deciphering of the face is certainly a great and difficult art. Its principles can never be learnt in abstracto. Its first condition is that the man must be looked at from a purely objective point of view; which is not so easy to do. As soon as, for instance, there is the slightest sign of dislike, or affection, or fear, or hope, or even the thought of the impression which we ourselves are making on him — in short, as soon as anything of a subjective nature is present, the hieroglyphics become confused and falsified. The sound of a language is only heard by one who does not understand it, because in thinking of the significance one is not conscious of the sign itself; and similarly the physiognomy of a man is only seen by one to whom it is still

strange — that is to say, by one who has not become accustomed to his face through seeing him often or talking to him. Accordingly it is, strictly speaking, the first glance that gives one a purely objective impression of a face, and makes it possible for one to decipher it. A smell only affects us when we first perceive it, and it is the first glass of wine which gives us its real taste; in the same way, it is only when we see a face for the first time that it makes a full impression upon us. Therefore one should carefully attend to the first impression; one should make a note of it, nay, write it down if the man is of personal importance — that is, if one can trust one's own sense of physiognomy. Subsequent acquaintance and intercourse will erase that impression, but it will be verified one day in the future.

En passant, let us not conceal from ourselves the fact that this first impression is as a rule extremely disagreeable: but how little there is in the majority of faces! With the exception of those that are beautiful, good-natured, and intellectual — that is, the very few and exceptional — I believe a new face for the most part gives a sensitive person a sensation akin to a shock, since the disagreeable impression is presented in a new and surprising combination.

As a rule it is indeed a sorry sight. There are individuals whose faces are stamped with such naïve vulgarity and lowness of character, such an animal limitation of intelligence, that one wonders how they care to go out with such a face and do not prefer to wear a mask. Nay, there are faces a mere glance at which makes one feel contaminated. One cannot therefore blame people, who are in a position to do so, if they seek solitude and escape the painful sensation of “seeing new faces.” The metaphysical explanation of this rests on the consideration that the individuality of each person is exactly that by which he should be reclaimed and corrected.

If any one, on the other hand, will be content with a psychological explanation, let him ask himself what kind of physiognomy can be expected in those whose minds, their whole life long, have scarcely ever entertained anything but petty, mean, and miserable thoughts, and vulgar, selfish, jealous, wicked, and spiteful desires. Each one of these thoughts and desires has left its impress on the face for the length of time it existed; all these marks, by frequent repetition, have eventually become furrows and blemishes, if one may say so. Therefore the appearance of the majority of people is calculated to give one a shock at first sight, and it is only by degrees that one becomes accustomed to a face — that is to say, becomes so indifferent to the impression as to be no longer affected by it.

But that the predominating facial expression is formed by countless fleeting and characteristic contortions is also the reason why the faces of intellectual men only become moulded gradually, and indeed only attain their sublime expression in old age; whilst portraits of them in their youth only show the first traces of it. But, on the other hand, what has just been said about the shock one receives at first sight coincides with the above remark, that it is only at first sight that a face makes its true and full impression. In order to get a purely objective and true impression of it, we must stand in no kind of relation to the person, nay, if possible, we must not even have spoken to him. Conversation makes one in some measure friendly disposed, and brings us into a certain rapport, a reciprocal subjective relation, which immediately interferes with our taking an objective view. As everybody strives to win either respect or friendship for himself, a man who is being

observed will immediately resort to every art of dissembling, and corrupt us with his airs, hypocrisies, and flatteries; so that in a short time we no longer see what the first impression had clearly shown us. It is said that “most people gain on further acquaintance” but what ought to be said is that “they delude us” on further acquaintance. But when these bad traits have an opportunity of showing themselves later on, our first impression generally receives its justification. Sometimes a further acquaintance is a hostile one, in which case it will not be found that people gain by it. Another reason for the apparent advantage of a further acquaintance is, that the man whose first appearance repels us, as soon as we converse with him no longer shows his true being and character, but his education as well — that is to say, not only what he really is by nature, but what he has appropriated from the common wealth of mankind; three-fourths of what he says does not belong to him, but has been acquired from without; so that we are often surprised to hear such a minotaur speak so humanly. And on a still further acquaintance, the brutality of which his face gave promise, will reveal itself in all its glory. Therefore a man who is gifted with a keen sense of physiognomy should pay careful attention to those verdicts prior to a further acquaintance, and therefore genuine. For the face of a man expresses exactly what he is, and if he deceives us it is not his fault but ours. On the other hand, the words of a man merely state what he thinks, more frequently only what he has learnt, or it may be merely what he pretends to think. Moreover, when we speak to him, nay, only hear others speak to him, our attention is taken away from his real physiognomy; because it is the substance, that which is given fundamentally, and we disregard it; and we only pay attention to its pathognomy, its play of feature while speaking. This, however, is so arranged that the good side is turned upwards.

When Socrates said to a youth who was introduced to him so that he might test his capabilities, “Speak so that I may see you” (taking it for granted that he did not simply mean “hearing” by “seeing”), he was right in so far as it is only in speaking that the features and especially the eyes of a man become animated, and his intellectual powers and capabilities imprint their stamp on his features: we are then in a position to estimate provisionally the degree and capacity of his intelligence; which was precisely Socrates’ aim in that case. But, on the other hand, it is to be observed, firstly, that this rule does not apply to the moral qualities of a man, which lie deeper; and secondly, that what is gained from an objective point of view by the clearer development of a man’s countenance while he is speaking, is again from a subjective point of view lost, because of the personal relation into which he immediately enters with us, occasioning a slight fascination, does not leave us unprejudiced observers, as has already been explained. Therefore, from this last standpoint it might be more correct to say: “Do not speak in order that I may see you.”

For to obtain a pure and fundamental grasp of a man’s physiognomy one must observe him when he is alone and left to himself. Any kind of society and conversation with another throw a reflection upon him which is not his own, mostly to his advantage; for he thereby is placed in a condition of action and reaction which exalts him. But, on the contrary, if he is alone and left to himself immersed in the depths of his own thoughts and sensations, it is only then that he is absolutely and wholly himself. And any one with a keen, penetrating eye for physiognomy can grasp the general character of his whole being at a glance. For on his face, regarded in and by itself, is indicated the ground tone of all his thoughts and efforts, the arrê^t irrevocable of his future, and of which he is only conscious

when alone.

The science of physiognomy is one of the principal means of a knowledge of mankind: arts of dissimulation do not come within the range of physiognomy, but within that of mere pathognomy and mimicry. This is precisely why I recommend the physiognomy of a man to be studied when he is alone and left to his own thoughts, and before he has been conversed with; partly because it is only then that his physiognomy can be seen purely and simply, since in conversation pathognomy immediately steps in, and he then resorts to the arts of dissimulation which he has acquired; and partly because personal intercourse, even of the slightest nature, makes us prejudiced, and in consequence impairs our judgment.

Concerning our physiognomy in general, it is still to be observed that it is much easier to discover the intellectual capacities of a man than his moral character. The intellectual capacities take a much more outward direction. They are expressed not only in the face and play of his features, but also in his walk, nay, in every movement, however slight it may be. One could perhaps discriminate from behind between a blockhead, a fool, and a man of genius. A clumsy awkwardness characterises every movement of the blockhead; folly imprints its mark on every gesture, and so do genius and a reflective nature. Hence the outcome of La Bruyere's remark: *Il n'y a rien de si délié, de si simple, et de si imperceptible où il n'y entrent des manières, qui nous décèlent: un sot ni n'entre, ni ne sort, ni ne s'assied, ni ne se lève, ni ne se tait, ni n'est sur ses jambes, comme un homme d'esprit.* This accounts for, by the way, that instinct stir et prompt which, according to Helvetius, ordinary people have of recognising people of genius and of running away from them. This is to be accounted for by the fact that the larger and more developed the brain, and the thinner, in relation to it, the spine and nerves, the greater not only is the intelligence, but also at the same time the mobility and pliancy of all the limbs; because they are controlled more immediately and decisively by the brain; consequently everything depends more on a single thread, every movement of which precisely expresses its purpose. The whole matter is analogous to, nay dependent on, the fact that the higher an animal stands in the scale of development, the easier can it be killed by wounding it in a single place. Take, for instance, batrachia: they are as heavy, clumsy, and slow in their movements as they are unintelligent, and at the same time extremely tenacious of life. This is explained by the fact that with a little brain they have a very thick spine and nerves. But gait and movement of the arms are for the most part functions of the brain; because the limbs receive their motion, and even the slightest modification of it, from the brain through the medium of the spinal nerves; and this is precisely why voluntary movements tire us. This feeling of fatigue, like that of pain, has its seat in the brain, and not as we suppose in the limbs, hence motion promotes sleep; on the other hand, those motions that are not excited by the brain, that is to say, the involuntary motions of organic life, of the heart and lungs, go on without causing fatigue: and as thought as well as motion is a function of the brain, the character of its activity is denoted in both, according to the nature of the individual. Stupid people move like lay figures, while every joint of intellectual people speaks for itself. Intellectual qualities are much better discerned, however, in the face than in gestures and movements, in the shape and size of the forehead, in the contraction and movement of the features, and especially in the eye; from the little, dull, sleepy-looking eye of the pig, through all gradations, to the brilliant sparkling eye of the genius. The look of wisdom, even of the best kind, is different from

that of genius, since it bears the stamp of serving the will; while that of the latter is free from it. Therefore the anecdote which Squarzafighi relates in his life of Petrarch, and has taken from Joseph Brivius, a contemporary, is quite credible — namely, that when Petrarch was at the court of Visconti, and among many men and titled people, Galeazzo Visconti asked his son, who was still a boy in years and was afterwards the first Duke of Milan, to pick out the wisest man of those present. The boy looked at every one for a while, when he seized Petrarch's hand and led him to his father, to the great admiration of all present. For nature imprints her stamp of dignity so distinctly on the distinguished among mankind that a child can perceive it. Therefore I should advise my sagacious countrymen, if they ever again wish to trumpet a commonplace person as a genius for the period of thirty years, not to choose for that end such an inn-keeper's physiognomy as was possessed by Hegel, upon whose face nature had written in her clearest handwriting the familiar title, commonplace person. But what applies to intellectual qualities does not apply to the moral character of mankind; its physiognomy is much more difficult to perceive, because, being of a metaphysical nature, it lies much deeper, and although moral character is connected with the constitution and with the organism, it is not so immediately connected, however, with definite parts of its system as is intellect. Hence, while each one makes a public show of his intelligence, with which he is in general quite satisfied, and tries to display it at every opportunity, the moral qualities are seldom brought to light, nay, most people intentionally conceal them; and long practice makes them acquire great mastery in hiding them.

Meanwhile, as has been explained above, wicked thoughts and worthless endeavours gradually leave their traces on the face, and especially the eyes. Therefore, judging by physiognomy, we can easily guarantee that a man will never produce an immortal work; but not that he will never commit a great crime.