

# Physiognomy

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## Introduction

Physiognomy (from the later Greek *physiognōmia*, which is a contraction of the classical form *physiognōmonia*) refers to the ancient science of determining someone's innate character on the basis of their outward, and hence observable, bodily features. For instance, Socrates' famous snub nose was universally interpreted by ancient physiognomists as a physiognomical sign of his innate lustfulness, which he only overcame through philosophical training. The discipline in its technical form with its own specialized practitioners first surfaces in Greece in the fifth century BCE, possibly through connections with the Near East, where bodily signs were taken as indicators of someone's future rather than his character. The shift to character perhaps arises from the widespread cultural practice in the ancient Greek and Roman world of treating someone's outward appearance as indicative for his personality, which is already visible in Homer (eighth century BCE). In the *Iliad*, for instance, a description of Thersites' quarrelsome and repulsive character is followed by a description of his equally ugly body (see *Iliad* 2.211–219), suggesting that this correspondence between body and character is no accident. Thersites is thus the perfect foil for the Greek ideal of the *kaloskagathos* – the man who is both beautiful and good. The same holds for the practice of attributing character traits associated with a particular animal species to a person based on similarities in their physique: it is first formalized in physiognomy, but was already widely used in a non-

technical way in ancient literature. The most famous example of the latter is perhaps Semonides of Amorgos' satire of women (fragment 7 *On Women*; seventh century BCE), which profiles ten different 'women-types', mostly by reference to their similarities to animal species: thus, one woman-type is filthy and fat as the sow, another is charmless, sex-crazed, and criminal as the weasel, and yet another is deformed and shameless as the ape. Only the bee-woman stands out positively for her modesty and industriousness.

The encompassing nature of physiognomical thought in Antiquity, both as crystallized in the form of technical handbooks and in its informal uses in literature, historiography, philosophy, medicine, and rhetoric can be gleaned from Förster's two-volume edition *Scriptores Physiognomonici Graeci et Latini* (1893), which is still the most comprehensive collection of ancient physiognomical material available (for an updated edition and translation of the physiognomical handbooks into English, see Swain 2007a). This chapter focuses more narrowly on physiognomy as a formalized, technical discipline (for an overview of physiognomical practices in Greek and Roman literature, see Evans 1969 and Sassi 2001), but as should be noticed from the outset, physiognomy never operated in a scientific or cultural vacuum. In the extant source-material, the most thorough theoretical discussions of physiognomy are provided either by philosophers, who worried about the validity of physiognomical inferences or the identification of signs, and whose own theories about the relation between body and soul allowed physiognomy to be used as a diagnostic tool for the prediction of the moral potential of prospective students, or by physicians, who found in physiognomy a cognate way of reading the human body, and integrated medical diagnoses and prognoses with moral ones. Similarly, the handbooks we have are written by men who were primarily philosophers, physicians, or even rhetors, who appropriated physiognomy for improving the delivery of their speeches, but also for being more effective

in the (negative) characterization of others as part of a political strategy. In the sections below, I first provide an overview of the most important physiognomical sources (section 1), followed by a discussion (in section 2) of the assumptions and methods of reasoning used in physiognomical science. The close relationship between physiognomy and philosophy, medicine, and rhetoric is the topic of sections 3–5. Suggestions for further reading can be found in the reference-section.

## 1. Physiognomical Sources and Handbooks

According to our sources, physiognomy first started to become a topic of theoretical reflection towards the end of the fifth century BCE Antisthenes, a follower of Socrates and head of the Cynics, is reported to have written a *Physiognomical Treatise on the Sophists* (mentioned by Diogenes Laertius 6.16), which unfortunately is lost and we know almost nothing of its contents (perhaps it offered an attack of physiognomical diagnoses offered by the sophist: see Tsouna 1998). The oldest extant material roughly consists of two categories: discussions focusing on the methods of physiognomy stemming from the fourth and third century BCE, written by Aristotle and his students, and handbooks focusing on the collection of physiognomical signs from the fourth century CE, preserving – in various forms – a treatise by the physician Loxus from probably the third century BCE (although see Misener 1923 for an earlier date) and a rhetorical treatise by the rhetor Polemon of Laodicea from the Second Sophistic (second century CE).

The oldest theoretical discussion of physiognomy can be found in chapter 2.27.70b7–38 of Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*, dating from the fourth century BCE. In the last five chapters of this treatise, Aristotle explains how the validity of non-deductive types of

reasoning, such as inductions or inferences from signs or probabilities (the so-called enthymemes, which are often used in rhetorical contexts and yield persuasion rather than truth), can be tested. According to Aristotle, these non-deductive inferences are logically valid if they can be resolved into the syllogistic figures he had previously established. Physiognomical inferences are discussed at the very end (*APr* 2.27.70b7–38), and although there is no *explicit* link between the preceding discussion of sign-inferences and this section (it has been suggested that the physiognomical section is unrelated or a later appendix: see Burnyeat 1982 and Smith 1989), it expresses the same interest in showing the potential validity of a non-deductive type of reasoning that is apparently prevalent in Aristotle's time. By using an example of a physiognomical inference that takes its signs from animals, Aristotle lays out the conditions under which "it is possible to physiognomize" (see further section 2 below), and argues that physiognomical inferences are valid as long as the proof is in the first figure (i.e., all premises must consist of universal affirmative propositions and the syllogism must have the form "A belongs to all B, B belongs to all C, therefore A belongs to all C"), just as he had argued earlier in the chapter with regard to other types of sign-inferences. Aristotle's treatment of physiognomy in the *Prior Analytics* opens the door to a scientific use of the discipline, but it is not clear whether he endorses it himself: Aristotle's use of conditional language – it is possible to physiognomize *if* certain conditions are met – warrants caution. However, given his inclusion of physiognomical material in the biological treatises (in the *History of Animals* 1.8.491b9–11.492b4, Aristotle lists physiognomical signs along with functional descriptions of parts on the human head; see section 3 below), it looks like Aristotle incorporated physiognomy as a valid way of reasoning into his own philosophy.

The oldest physiognomical handbook that has been preserved is the *Physiognomy*,

falsely attributed to Aristotle (see ps.-Aristotle *Physiognomy*, 1.805a1–6.814b9). The handbook which consists of two parts stems most likely from the third century BCE, and was written by two Peripatetic authors who were each responsible for their own text (see Boys-Stones 2007, *pace* Vogt 1999 who believes that the handbook was written by one author at two different stages in his life). Treatise A (so labeled in Förster’s 1893 collection) runs from 1.805a1 to 3.808b10. It opens by stating that mind and body are mutually affected by each other, offers examples of these mutual affections, criticizes the three existing physiognomical methods for identifying signs (from animals, human ethnicities, and expressions of emotion: on these methods, see further in section 2), and argues for a modified form of animal physiognomy. It also provides a detailed list of those aspects of the body which can constitute physiognomical signs, and lists twenty-two characters traits and the signs by which they can be recognized. Treatise B runs from 4.808b11 to 6.814b9, and similarly opens with a preface confirming the “sympathetic” (*sumpathein*) relationship between body and soul and a list of examples illustrating their causal dependency. It continues by discussing the problems and difficulties in using the method of animal physiognomy, introduces the idea that for doing this type of animal-physiognomy appropriately the animal kingdom should be divided into two classes, i.e., the male and the female, and offers a list of body parts and the characters they signify (moving from foot to head, and then on to gait, voice, and stature). The methodology that is put forward in both treatises, as we will see in section 2 below, is quite sophisticated and roughly Aristotelian in nature. The attribution of the treatises to Aristotle is therefore quite understandable: both treatises open by responding to the condition formulated by Aristotle in the *Prior Analytics* that the body and soul must change simultaneously for physiognomy to be possible, and make use of similar technical terms borrowed from Aristotle in their methodological sections (see Boys-Stones 2007 on the

convergences between the three authors). In addition, both Pliny (*Natural History* 11.273–274) and Diogenes Laertius (5.25) believed that Aristotle had written a physiognomical treatise, so that already in Antiquity the oldest extant handbook was simply attributed to him.

The handbooks from the fourth century CE preserve older sections of handbooks originally written by two different authors, Loxus and Polemon. From the handbook on physiognomy by the physician Loxus from the third century BCE we only possess a couple of fragments, translated from its original Greek into Latin and scattered through various chapters of the eclectic *Book of Physiognomy* or *Liber Physiognomoniae* from the fourth century CE (for the Latin text of this handbook with translations, see André 1981 and Repath 2007b, who both rely heavily on Förster 1893; see also Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.33). The author of the *Book of Physiognomy* – who was once falsely identified as Apuleius – is unknown and is henceforth referred to as ‘Anonymus Latinus’. The handbook opens with a reference to the three sources the author drew his material from: “I had at hand the books of three authors who have written on physiognomy, Loxus the physician, Aristotle the philosopher [the reference is to the ps.-Aristotelian handbook], and Palemon [sic; the author appears not to have known Polemon’s real name: see Repath 2007b] the rhetor...” However, few sections are derived from the ps.-Aristotelian handbook or from Loxus, leaving us with relatively little information about Loxus for whom this treatise is our only source (Anonymous Latinus 1, 2, 12, 48, 80–81, 89, 117–131, and 133 uses Loxus; Boys-Stones 2007 argues for the additional inclusion of chapters 13–15).

As with Loxus’ handbook, the original Greek handbook that constitutes perhaps the greatest masterpiece in ancient physiognomy, so also Polemon’s *Physiognomy* from the second century CE is lost. However, due to its continued importance and usefulness for physiognomical practice both in the Second-Sophistic society and in Arabic physiognomy its

contents have survived in a variety of independent sources and translations (see appendix A for the five most important source-materials on Polemon's *Physiognomy*). From these sources it appears that Polemon was not very interested in the logical form of physiognomical inferences or in the relation between body and soul, both of which preoccupied the Aristotelian treatments of physiognomy (on the contents and methods of Polemon's *Physiognomy*, see Barton 1994 and Swain 2007b). Instead, his handbook is mostly a collection of physiognomical signs, accompanied with ethnic and psychological portraits of his contemporaries drawn from his personal observations of them. Unusual attention is paid to the physiognomical signs of the eye (Polemon's *Physiognomy* probably consisted of two books, the first of which was entirely devoted to the eye), which Polemon claims are the most important among signs and which require his expertise to be clearly distinguished. On the surface, the handbook appears to have been written for the sake of the rhetorical training of students in how to recognize physiognomical signs, but the mostly negative characterization of his contemporaries in it suggest that Polemon may also have used physiognomy for the purpose of invective and for the betterment of his own status.

In addition to these extended theoretical discussions of physiognomy in form of handbooks, there are many other relevant passages and remarks preserved in the ancient corpus about the science of physiognomy; the most interesting of these will be discussed in the sections 3–5 below, but let me first present the scientific assumptions and the methods of reasoning that are used in physiognomy according to the sources discussed above.

## 2. The Scientific Assumptions and Methods of Physiognomy

The main method of reasoning used in physiognomy is that of induction: once the physiognomical signs of the human body have been identified, the corresponding character traits can simply be inferred, while knowledge about the significance of bodily signs for character is derived by analogy from one or more of the following three domains. First, in what is purportedly the oldest physiognomical method, practitioners of animal-physiognomy rely on parallels between the human body and that of animals (for instance, lions have distinctively long extremities and are courageous in character; a person with exceptionally long extremities must therefore also possess the corresponding character trait, which is courage). Second, physiognomists of the ethnologist kind rely on parallels between the person being physiognomized and the physical characteristics of human ethnic groups (thus, a person who possesses red hair like the Scythians, must also be rash and quick to anger like the Scythians). And third, physiognomists of the pathological kind rely on parallels between that person and the physical characteristics of people undergoing strong emotions or passions (e.g., a person with a permanent snarling grin on his face must have a surly character). This type of reasoning raises many methodological questions, such as which (combination) of these domains one is supposed to use, how each of the individual signs is to be identified, and what forms of physiognomical inferences are actually valid, all of which come up in the oldest extant theoretical discussions of physiognomy.

As mentioned earlier, Aristotle is interested in the logical validity of physiognomical inferences in the *Prior Analytics*, but he also formulates conditions for the possibility of physiognomy that express other – ontological and epistemological – concerns, all of which are also addressed by the later Peripatetic authors of the *Physiognomy*. The first condition that



Aristotle imposes for physiognomy to be possible is that the body and soul must be changed simultaneously by natural affections. This is an ontological condition: for physiognomical signs to be true, certain parts of reality, namely body and soul, must be structured in a certain “sympathetic” way. Aristotle does not expand on the details of this kind of theory of body and soul that underlies physiognomy – or whether he endorses it himself: certainly his own hylomorphic psychology makes physiognomy a practicable scientific enterprise (see Boys-Stones 2007). The Peripatetic authors, however, explain that this *sympatheia* between body and soul entails not only an ontological interdependence of the two, which explains why natural affections of the one *simultaneously* cause alterations of the other, but also some kind of ‘natural unity’ between the two, which explains why specific body types always go together with their *own appropriate* character types and vice versa. Neither of the two Peripatetic authors specify their own causal theory about this sympathetic relation: given their examples, the author of Treatise A may have been an ‘epiphenomenalist’, i.e., someone who considered the physiological conditions of the body to be the cause of psychological character traits, whereas the author of Treatise B seemed to have held the opposite view (see again Boys-Stones 2007). Nevertheless, both start out by affirming that there indeed exists such a relation, which is all that is needed to make physiognomy possible.

Aristotle combines his formulations of the second and third requirements: he states that there must *exist* one distinctive or proper (*idion*) sign for each affection (again an ontological requirement) and that it must be possible to *grasp* these distinctive signs for each affection (an epistemological requirement). Assuming that there is one distinctive bodily sign for each affection of the soul or character trait, we need a method for getting to know the relevant signs and for being able to tell with which affection or trait they correlate. Aristotle clarifies this method with an example from animal physiognomy, with which he must have

been familiar from contemporary practices (in his *Generation of Animals* 4.3.769b20–21, Aristotle provides one of the earliest references to physiognomical activity in Athens when he mentions ‘a certain physiognomist’ who ‘reduced all faces to those of two or three animals’). Let us suppose that the distinctive sign for courage in lions is having large extremities, where the sign is distinctive because it only belongs to the species of lions as a whole. However, the bodily feature of having large extremities may also belong to individuals of other animal kinds, such as a man (as long as it does not belong to that animal kind as a whole, otherwise the sign would no longer be distinctive), in which case the corresponding character trait, courage, will also be present in those individuals. Thus, for physiognomy to be possible, one first needs to be able to collect all distinctive signs from animals that have a particular, distinctive character trait. The case gets more complicated when an animal kind as a whole has *two* distinctive affections, such as lions being both courageous and generous. For, as Aristotle points out, how can we know which bodily feature is the sign for which character trait? The answer for this problem is to search for other individual animals to which one of the two character traits – but not the other – belongs, and to see what distinctive bodily feature they have: for instance, if a man is brave but not generous, and he has long extremities, long extremities must be a sign of braveness, but if he has some other distinctive bodily feature, long extremities must be a sign of generosity.

Compared to the methodological discussions of how to select signs in the ps.-Aristotelian *Physiognomy*, Aristotle’s discussion here seems much less sophisticated: although all three authors share a common concern for the identification of signs *proper* to one animal species as opposed to common ones, the Peripatetic authors exhibit knowledge of other (possibly later) physiognomical methods of selecting signs besides that of using animals, and

even their use of the animal method is more critical and refined. The first author criticizes the selection of signs by animal-physiognomists who search for signs that are distinctive for one animal species only. As he points out, human features are never completely like those found in one kind of animal, but form a resemblance to several of them, and only very few signs are distinctive for individual animal kinds to start with – most signs are common to many animals. He therefore proposes that “instead, it is necessary to select [signs] from as many animals as possible, and from those that do not have any affection in common in their mindset except for the one of which we search the signs” (*Phgn* 1.806a4–6). The author of the second treatise adds the condition that one must first divide the animal world in males and females and *then* collect the physical and mental attributes fitting with these two. He also introduces the idea – absent from both Aristotle and Treatise A – of “congruity” or “fittingness” (*epiprepeia*) between the sign and the character trait it signifies as a criterion for judging how to interpret a certain physiognomical sign in a person (for instance, the pale skin that indicates fear is only slightly different from pale skin that indicates bodily fatigue, so that only those experienced with the congruity between signs and signified will be able to tell the difference and determine quickly and correctly whether a person is scared or fatigued) and in collecting signs (signs must stand out as being congruous with the character traits they signify, for instance, hair falling onto foreheads and reaching down to one’s nose signifies servility, as “this kind of appearance is fitting to a slave”; *Phgn* 6.812b36–813a2). Note that the deeper epistemological question about whether we can in fact know the characterological contents of the souls or minds of others is raised by none of these authors: it is simply taken for granted that one can, as is the related ontological presupposition that souls/minds have content or exist at all (see Tsouna 1998: apparently the ancients rarely expressed doubts about other minds).

The fourth condition pertains to the logical validity of physiognomical inferences. According to Aristotle, “it is possible to physiognomize in the first figure when the middle term [B] converts with the first extreme [A], but extends wider than and does not convert with the third extreme [C]” (*APr* 2.27.70b32–34). Aristotle had already explained why the inference has to be drawn in the *first* figure: only the use of the first figure gives rise to valid inferences from signs and to arguments that count as evidence in those cases in which the signs are in fact universally true. The lion-example, in its formalized form, is used to illustrate the further requirements:

A belongs to all B [and: B belongs to all A]	courage <i>belongs to all that has</i> large extremities [and: <i>vice versa</i> ]
B belongs to all C [and: B belongs to some D]	having large extremities <i>belongs to all</i> lions [and: <i>to some</i> men]
A belongs to all C	courage <i>belongs to all</i> lions [and: <i>to some</i> men]

First, in the minor premise of the form ‘B belongs to all C’, where B picks out the physiognomical sign and C picks out the animal species from which the sign is taken, the sign picked out must belong to the *whole* animal species, but its scope must also extend to *some other animals*, although not to that other animal species as a whole. If the terms were to be convertible (for instance, if all animals with large extremities were lions), the sign would be a *unique* sign for that species and could not be used to draw inferences about the presence of its concomitant affection in other animals. Second, regarding the major premise of the form ‘A belongs to all B’, where A picks out the character trait for which the sign (B) is indicative, Aristotle explains that the sign must belong to all animals that are courageous, and conversely, that all animals that are courageous must have the concomitant sign, otherwise, there would not be one sign for one character trait. If, then, the sign is true, one can infer from the presence of long extremities in a person that he is courageous.

The two Peripatetic authors do not discuss the details of physiognomical syllogisms in the way Aristotle does, but they do affirm the usefulness of syllogisms in physiognomy. The author of Treatise A points to the unique capacity of philosophers to understand “that when certain premises are given, something else necessarily follows,” which is exactly how Aristotle defines syllogistic reasoning. This author claims we should rely on this method of reasoning in his alternative, “never been tried” method of physiognomy according to which one infers a character trait *indirectly* from the observation of the presence of the sign of a second character trait with which the presence of the first is necessarily connected (e.g., one can infer that a person is envious from seeing that he has the physiognomical sign for irascibility, since the disposition for irascibility presupposes the existence of envy in that person; *Phgn* 2.807a3–10). The method is also endorsed by the author of Treatise B, who similarly refers to the use of syllogisms in the selection of signs (*Phgn* 4.809a19–25).

The handbooks of Polemon and Loxus are first and foremost practical manuals, influenced by the rhetorical practices of the time, and show much less concern for the epistemological, ontological, and logical issues raised in the Peripatetic treatises (on the absences of philosophical themes in Polemon, see Gherseti 2007a). However, the handbooks of the Second Sophistic make use of the same forms of inferential reasoning (reflected in the enthymeme-like structure of the descriptions of signs and their significances) and similarly emphasize the need for collecting and combining signs carefully (on methods used by Polemon, see Barton 1994 and Swain 2007b). For instance, when addressing the interpretative question of how to deal with multiple, opposing signs in one person, Polemon’s advice is to memorize his version of the hierarchy of parts (according to which eyes come first, then the other parts on the face, then the neck, chest area etc. until one reaches the feet) and assign more value to the signs from the more important parts and

most to the eyes. (Note that Polemon's ordering of the parts from head to foot here follows the standard practice in ancient medicine, but that this was not necessarily also the standard in physiognomy: Ps.-Aristotle B and Adamantius, for instance, use the foot-to-head ordering of bodily parts. Why these latter authors deviate from the medical ordering of parts, and why physiognomy uses two distinct orders, is unclear.) For the eyes are "the gateway to the soul" (see Adamantius A4), "sum of all physiognomy", and the basis of the physiognomists' "whole authority" (see Anonymus Latinus 20). Other methodological remarks pertain to techniques that will be of practical use: one must not warn the person whom one is about to physiognomize beforehand (he may deliberately change his signs: Adamantius A4) and be careful about using signs from physical attributes like color, movement, voice, and hair (making "correct judgment" of a person by using these signs only works in combination with other, more significant signs: see Leiden B31). Polemon also adds a new practice to the repertoire of the Greek physiognomist: providing predictions of the future. In the last three chapters of his *Physiognomy*, Polemon describes among others how he was able to foretell that a great evil was about to happen to a woman he saw in a temple (moments after predicting her impending evil, the woman was told that her daughter had drowned) and how he predicted abductions at weddings (Leiden B53). His methods in forming these *prognoses* involve not only the trusted physiognomical method of interpreting bodily signs, but also assessing other, situational indications and reading people's intentions (cf. Anonymus Latinus 133): physiognomy as practiced in this way thus shares close affiliations to the contemporary, prognostic disciplines of astrology and medicine. The connections between physiognomy and ancient medicine will be explored further in section 4, but let me first say more about the philosophical interest in physiognomy beyond its particular method of reasoning.

### 3. Diagnostic Uses of Physiognomy in Ancient Philosophy

As I suggested in the introduction, the practice of reading the body for signs probably arrived in Greece via the Near East, where bodily signs were treated as having prophetic significance (on the Mesopotamian sources, see Barton 1994 and Bottéro 1974.) The earliest historic practitioners of physiognomy in Greece in fact appear to have been of Near Eastern origin, and, interestingly, the person who is being physiognomized by these foreign physiognomists is the most famous Greek philosopher – and the notoriously ugly – Socrates.

According to one story, an anonymous Syrian magus traveled to Athens, where he used physiognomy – in accordance with the Near Eastern practice – to predict Socrates' future violent death (Aristotle, F 32 Rose<sup>3</sup>). In a different story, the physiognomist Zopyrus (who might have been Persian, but it is also possible that Zopyrus and the Syrian magus were actually the same person), used physiognomy – perhaps in a manner already reflecting the Greek obsession with character rather than with future – to diagnose Socrates as a man of many vices, low intelligence, and as being addicted to womanizing (or pederasty, in the version of Cassian, *Conferences* 13.5). The latter story is preserved in fragments of a Socratic dialogue called *Zopyrus* by Phaedo of Elis (see fragments 6–11 Rosetti), which present an unexpected twist on the scene familiar from Plato's dialogues in which Socrates reveals the ignorance of a sophist. Here, instead of joining his friends in laughter or ridiculing Zopyrus' sophistic art (Socrates was known to be a model of virtue and a seeker of wisdom: surely Zopyrus' physiognomical diagnosis must have been wrong), the fictional Socrates states that Zopyrus was in fact right about his natural character traits. He then points to the power of philosophy, which helped him either *overcome* those bad innate characteristics in one way or another. According to most sources, it was so as to be able to act virtuously: the idea seems

to be that a well-trained reason can overrule bad inclinations and desires grounded in our innate nature and thereby steer our actions towards the good. But according to Cicero's version (fragment 6 Rosetti), it was rather to *transform* his nature so as to actually become a virtuous man, by habituating and thereby permanently changing his innate character traits. This anecdote about Zopyrus and the 'paradox' about Socrates' outward ugliness and inward beauty remained a famous test-case in the debates about the validity of physiognomy well beyond antiquity and especially among the Renaissance physiognomists and their skeptics (see McLean 2007).

Whatever its exact historical origins, physiognomy appears to have made its first entry into Greek culture through philosophy, and this explains perhaps why, according to one tradition, it was a Greek philosopher – Pythagoras of Samos from the sixth century BCE – who first invented the discipline. Supposedly, Pythagoras applied physiognomy to his prospective students as a means to assess their character traits and intelligence before admitting them to his school (the story is related in Late Antique Platonist sources: see especially Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 1.9.2, Hippolytus *Refutation of all Heresies* 1.2, and Porphyry *Life of Pythagoras* 13.2–14.1 and 54). In both this anecdote about Pythagoras and the story about the encounter between Socrates and Zopyrus, physiognomy is portrayed as a discipline that apparently provides a reliable means for diagnosing innate character based on outward appearance, while philosophy is what provides the means for the moral development of this natural character (and of reason). The two disciplines complement each other in this way, and the Greek philosophical source material is full of passages expressing the diagnostic value of reading someone's outward appearances, even if not all of those passages endorse physiognomical thinking in the technical sense. For instance, in his narration of Prodicus' myth about Hercules at the crossroads, who has to choose between a



life of virtue or of vice, Xenophon depicts the woman embodying Virtue as fair and beautiful with modest eyes, whereas the body of Vice is plump and soft with open eyes – the physiognomical sign for immodesty (*Memoirs of Socrates* 2.1.22). Xenophon also has Socrates explain to the painter Parrhasius and the sculptor Cleiton that the beauty of the soul and not just that of the body can be captured by their art: since the soul uses the body as a tool, a person’s inner character will manifest itself through his physical expression and posture and can thus be represented (*Memoirs of Socrates* 3.10.3). Even Plato, who seems to treat Socrates’ ugliness as evidence that outward appearance is *not* a reliable guide for the qualities of one’s soul (see especially *Symposium* 215b–222b and Boys-Stones 2007, who argues that the majority of bodily descriptions in Plato resist any physiognomical conclusions) and whose own theory of the soul fits ill with the ontological presuppositions of physiognomy, suggests – in a manner familiar from animal physiognomy – that there is a correspondence between the kinds of virtues or vices present in one’s soul and the kind of animal body in which one reincarnates (see *Phaedo* 81d–82b, *Timaeus* 42b–c and 90f–92c, and *Republic* 620a–d). And in Theophrastus’ *Characters*, which generally focuses more on the *behaviors* exhibited by people representing a certain vice (thereby codifying the so-called ‘ethical types’ that played a role in the pathological method of physiognomy), the Backbiter (chapter 27) claims to be able to read bad character from someone’s face. Serious interest in physiognomy among Greek philosophers was, however, limited to those who had already accepted, for independent reasons, a ‘sympathetic’ theory of the body and soul. Physiognomy thus did not so much influence developments in philosophy as that it was accepted and discussed by philosophers who were already hospitable to the kind of correspondence between body and soul presupposed by physiognomy (see again Boys-Stones 2007). Traces of such serious interest can be found in Aristotle, the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, and, to some extent, in the later

Platonists.

Aristotle clearly had a theoretical interest in physiognomy (see *Prior Analytics* 2.27, 70b7–38 discussed above), but may also have had a practical interest in the discipline as suggested by the inclusion of physiognomical signs in his treatment of the parts on the human head in the *History of Animals* (1.8.491b9–11.492b4). One of the most salient features in his description of the physiognomical signs is that they all constitute facial parts that hold an exact middle between two extremes in position, size, or color. For instance, eyes recede, protrude, or are in a position in between, and Aristotle says that while the ones that are most receding are sharpest and thus functionally best, “the middle ones are a sign of the best character”. This language, of course, is strongly reminiscent of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean as presented in his ethical treatises, according to which virtues of character are conditions that hit the mean – appropriate to the agent – between two other states, the one involving an excess, the other a deficiency (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.2.1103b26–6.1107a27). Aristotle explains the preservation of virtue, which is a disposition of the soul, by analogy to how health – a physiological condition – in the body is preserved: people are healthy who exercise and eat in the amounts that are appropriate for them and preserve a mean between exercising and eating too much or too little. Aristotle’s identification of intermediate facial features as signs of the best character also suggests that there is an underlying ‘intermediate’ physiological condition that is responsible for both those facial features and the character traits of the soul. For, according to Aristotle, the natural (pre-habituated) character traits animals or humans possess are determined by the four material elements that make up the mixture of their blood, which is the nutriment and matter for their body (see *Parts of Animals* II 2.647b10–4.651a19). Humans reportedly have the best quality of blood: it is well-mixed and is therefore hot, thin, and pure, making humans prone to natural courage and

intelligence. It is possible that Aristotle thought that those people in which the blood was optimally well-mixed (hot, but not too hot, etc.) would not only have the best possible natural character traits (such as courage, rather than spiritedness that is caused by too much hotness), but also the best possible realization of their physical traits (where “best” is holding a mathematical mean between two extremes). People in which the blood is slightly off balance – for instance, due to climate, diet, or age – would also have facial features that are slightly off from their ideal intermediate position, size, or color. Aristotle never explores this possibility explicitly, but if natural character traits can be read off from someone’s facial features, and if a “well-mixed” natural character makes it easier to make men virtuous (as Aristotle thinks it does: see *Politics* 7.7.1327b18–38), lawmakers ought to use physiognomy in their selection of future citizens, just as Pythagoras physiognomized his future students.

In the Hellenistic period, we find several philosophers who are associated with the practice of physiognomy. For instance, Zeno of Citium (333–263 BCE), the founder of the Stoa, is reported to have provided a physiognomical image of a young man (see Clement of Alexandria, *The Teacher* 3.11.74). An anecdote about his student Cleanthes of Assos (331–232 BCE) narrates how he had claimed that “character could be grasped from appearance”, but had trouble diagnosing the sexual deviancy of the man that was brought before him (as his skin had toughened from working on the land) – until he sneezed (see Diogenes Laertius 7.173). And Chrysippus (280–207 BCE) said that “goods and evil are perceptible”, including the passions, vices, and virtues (see Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 19). It has even been argued that the Epicureans created physiognomically coded statues of Epicurus to be sent out of the Garden as a means to recruit new students through his image (see Frischer 1982), although the supporting evidence for this hypothesis is fairly thin. It is not clear, however, whether any of these philosophers actually considered themselves physiognomists or can be

thought of as being physiognomists in the technical sense (see Boys-Stones 2007). The case may be different for the late Stoic philosopher Posidonius (ca 135–51 BCE), who “rightly reminds us of what physiognomical considerations can show,” which is that the quality and heat of the blood – influenced by the mixture characterizing the environment in which animals and humans live – determine bodily features, which in their turn determine emotions and character traits (see Posidonius, fragment 416 Edelstein-Kidd; Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 5.5.22.1-2 De Lacy). If this report is right, Posidonius might have been a true physiognomist who believed that there exists an innate character that is grounded in the material properties of the body.

Although Plato’s psychology and treatment of outward appearance was mostly anti-physiognomical in outlook, later Platonists (third to fifth century CE) largely appear to have accepted physiognomy as true: the story about Pythagoras using physiognomy to select his future students appears to originate in them, and they also add a story about Socrates himself physiognomizing a very young Plato (Apuleius, *On Plato and his Teachings* 1.1) and Alcibiades before taking them on as students (Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 4.1; Proclus, *Commentary on Plato’s First Alcibiades* 94.4–15; and Olympiodorus, *On the Alcibiades* 13.19). According to Proclus, Socrates “saw many wonderful indications in Alcibiades that he was capable of virtue” and had learned this custom of judging characters from the Pythagoreans. However, in order to make physiognomy possible, Plato’s psychology had to undergo some transformations (see Boys-Stones 2007): while the Platonists preserve the ontological independence and separability of body and soul, the process of reincarnation is now described as souls finding bodies that carry a ‘resemblance’ or ‘image’ of the soul’s disposition. Outward appearance can be used as a reliable indicator for the innate qualities of the soul, because the soul selected that body because of its fittingness to itself (see, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.12). One

Platonist, Aristides Quintilianus (probably late third century CE), goes even so far as to claim that souls that do not find a fitting body remodel the body they receive in accordance with their own characteristics and make it like themselves, thus explaining, for instance, why some men come to have feminine features while some women come to have masculine features (*On Music* 2.8, 66.25–67.14). The power of physiognomy for these philosophers was limited, however: since a person's innate characteristics do not *determine* his present behavior or moral character, physiognomy can only reveal a person's innate potentials – potentials that, as in the case of Alcibiades, may well go unfulfilled. Physiognomy can diagnose, but philosophy is required to realize someone's potential to the fullest or to provide a moral cure for the naturally base.

#### **4. Physiognomy and Medical Prognosis**

According to a different tradition, it was not the philosopher Pythagoras but Hippocrates – the late fifth century physician from Cos and proclaimed author of a wide-ranging corpus of medical treatises (dating from the fifth to third century BCE) – who invented the science of physiognomy. This is at least what Galen of Pergamum, the philosopher-physician from the second century CE, says in his own treatise about physiognomy (*The Soul's Dependence on the Body* 4.797–8 Kühn). In a work falsely attributed to Galen, Hippocrates is even 'quoted' as saying that “the judgment of those who practice medicine but have no share in physiognomy rambles in the dark, getting old and sluggish” (Ps.-Galen, *Prognostica de Decubitu* 19.530.5–10 Kühn; the author of this treatise – whose real name was possibly Imbrasios of Ephesus – uses the quote, however, as evidence for Hippocrates' interest in astrology). And in the Arabic physiognomical tradition, in which Polemon is hailed as the discipline's founder, the

classic anecdote about Socrates' encounter with Zopyrus is repeated, but now with Polemon taking the role of Zopyrus and Hippocrates that of Socrates. Although Hippocrates was likely not the actual inventor of the discipline and certainly not a physiognomist in the technical sense, there are indeed a number of 'physiognomical' observations scattered through the Hippocratic corpus. In the *Epidemics*, for instance, the Hippocratic author mentions several bodily signs from which character can be inferred: according to 2.6.1 (5.132 Littré), a big head with small eyes indicates quickness to anger; for other signs, see 2.5.1, 16, and 23 (5.128, 130, and 132 Littré), 2.6.14 and 19 (5.136 Littré), and 6.4.19 (5.312 Littré). The chapter titles of *Epidemics* 2.5 (5.128 Littré) and 2.6 (5.132 Littré) also include references to the science of physiognomy, but these are likely later additions and not original. And certainly ancient medicine and physiognomy share very similar approaches to the human body and rely equally on prediction and inductive reasoning in their respective methods (on physiognomy and ancient medicine, see Boys-Stones 2007). For where the physiognomist draws inferences from external bodily signs (*sēmeia*) to determine the underlying character of a person, the physician relies on external bodily symptoms (*symptomata*) to diagnose diseases in his patients and – perhaps more importantly – to provide a prognosis for their development. And to the extent that physiognomists and physicians express any commitment to underlying physiological theories about character or health and disease, they both identify as causes the mixtures (*kraseis*) of blood and/or other bodily humors (such as phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile). Thus, both health and good character traits are due to a balance and well-mixedness of the material constituents of the body, whereas disturbances in this balance produce diseases and bad character traits.

It should come as no surprise that one of the few physiognomists of Antiquity we know by name, Loxus, was a physician, and that it was one of the most famous physicians of

Antiquity, Galen, who developed the causal connection between the mixture of bodily elements, health, and character most fully. About the first we know rather little: based on the fragmented and often disorganized material in Anonymous Latinus, Loxus appears to have defended a strikingly Aristotelian account of how differences in the heat of the blood, which he identifies as the seat of the soul, are responsible for bodily differences as well as for differences in the intelligence and character of people (on Loxus' Peripatetic affiliation, see Boys-Stones 2007). He probably practiced a physiognomy of the animal-method (each of the chapters 117–131 describes the characteristics of one particular animal species, identifies the physical features by which humans of this animal type can be recognized, and explains what it means for their character), and, according to the opening of chapter 133, may even have used physiognomy for predicting the future. Unfortunately the remainder of the chapter and the rest of the treatise are not preserved, so the exact nature of these predictions – whether they are medical prognoses or general predictions about what would happen to a person in the future – remains unknown.

About Galen's theoretical views about physiognomy we are much better informed, even if we do not know whether he actually relied much on physiognomy in his own medical practice. According to him, every part of a living being's body consists of its own mixture or temperament of the four humors, blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile (see especially his *On Temperaments*). Each humor contributes its own material properties to the mixture (blood, for instance, is hot and wet, and accordingly heats and wets the body, whereas black bile is cold and dry, etc.), and the particular mixture and balance of these properties in the resulting body determine an individual's bodily features, health, but also his character traits. For, as Galen states at the beginning of his most important physiognomical treatise (*The Soul's Dependence on the Body* 4.767 Kühn), “the faculties of the soul follow the mixtures of the

body,” thereby explicitly endorsing the kind of sympathetic relationship between body and soul required for physiognomy (cf. the opening line of ps.-Aristotle’s *Physiognomics*, “that the minds follow the bodies...,” to which Galen is likely responding). The exact details of Galen’s psychology remain unclear (Galen himself claims agnosticism about the nature of the soul and its relation to the body, and shifts positions even within a single treatise), but the correspondence between bodily mixture and psychological faculties allows Galen – mostly by reflecting directly on quotes drawn from Hippocrates, Plato, and Aristotle – to develop an extensive physiognomical theory. First, because each species is constituted of roughly the same mixture of humors (they all follow the same recipe, so to speak), Galen can explain why all members of that species, if their mixture is appropriately balanced, will have relatively similar bodily features and the same corresponding character traits. For instance, because all lions have a relative large amount of blood in their mixture and especially around their heart, they all have much hair on their chests and are spirited in character (and much chest hair in a man will be a sign of his spiritedness). Second, because the mixtures of the whole body and of its parts can be affected by other physiological factors, such as climate or diet, or even aging and disease, individual variations in those mixtures can explain why individuals within one species look different (Galen spends a lot of time discussing ethnic differences in humans, such as differences in the color and structure of hair and skin) and have slightly different character traits. The phlegmatic person (typically, a woman), for instance, has a bodily mixture in which phlegm dominates (relative to the human ideal or ‘standard recipe’): the excess wetness and coldness results in soft, white, hairless bodies and in cowardly and spiritless characters. The person with the healthiest condition and the best character traits is according to Galen – and following Aristotle’s lead – the well-mixed person, who in every respect takes up a mean between two extremes: his character is



between rash and cowardly, his skin between smooth and hairy, etc.

By thus making a balanced mixture of the body both the cause of health and of good character, Galen also allows physicians, like himself, to take over some of the tasks of philosophy and to contribute to the development of virtue: physical exercise and diets should not only be prescribed to people with illnesses but also to those who need moral improvement (cf. Galen's advice on studying the eyes of the healthy for determining the character of the soul and of the sick for prognosis in *To Glaucon on Medical Method* 1.2 (11.11 Kühn): physiognomy and medical diagnosis go hand in hand according to this passage). Galen claims that his theory about the temperaments has practical value, and claims that "it would be wise of my opponents – those men who are unhappy at the idea that nourishment has this power to make men more or less temperate, more or less continent, brave or cowardly, soft and gentle or violent and quarrelsome – to come to me even now and receive instruction on their diet; they would derive enormous benefit from this in their command of ethics..." (see *The Soul's Dependence on the Body* 4.767 and 807–808 Kühn). In the later Arabic tradition, in which physiognomy and medical science were also closely connected, Galen's thoroughly medicalized physiognomy with its grounding in a humoral psychology would become a major influence.

## **5. The Political Use of Physiognomy in the Rhetoric of the Second Sophistic**

Although Galen traces his interest in physiognomy back to its roots in Hippocratic medicine and the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, it is likely that he first encountered the discipline during his years as a student with the physician Pelops in Smyrna. The city of Smyrna, which was part of the province of Asia under the High Roman Empire, formed the main center for

the education in rhetoric during the period of the Second Sophistic. It was also full of practitioners of physiognomy, whose art had been appropriated by the rhetors for the practical purposes of describing the characters of others (the images and analogies used in these character sketches or *ethologiae* often drew from physiognomical clichés) and of enhancing the delivery (or *hypokrisis*) of their speech, which involves the representation of the character of the speaker himself through his body language, voice, gait, gestures, and facial expressions. One of the most famous of these rhetors who had incorporated physiognomy in his art, Polemon of Laodicea (also known under his Roman name, Marcus Antonius Polemo), had just died when Galen arrived in Smyrna, but Galen must have been familiar with Polemon's physiognomical handbook.

As the son of a very wealthy family with close ties to the Roman Emperors, Polemon grew up to be a well-rounded intellectual and political leader of Smyrna, the city he settled in during his teens: there he taught rhetorical skills to students (hence his name, Polemon the Sophist), was famous for his display speeches and improvisatory style as a rhetor, acted as a diplomat and administrator of his city, and received various special honors and privileges from Hadrian, the Roman Emperor (Polemon's life is described by Philostratus, in his *Lives of the Sophists*; see also Barton 1994 and Swain 2007b). Ostensibly, Polemon had written the physiognomical handbook for instructional purposes for his students in rhetoric, and certainly the treatise is full of pedagogical remarks (see e.g., the opening of Leiden B2: "So when you look at a man, compare him and think about him: do you see that he is masculine or feminine?"), while his long and minute discussion of the physiognomical signs of the eye fits with the rhetorical practice that had made the eye the primary indicator of the rhetor's feelings (as Cicero says in *On Rhetoric* 3.221 "all delivery comes from the soul, and facial expression is the mirror of the soul, the eyes the indicators of what it feels"; see Gleason

1995). However, the rather disorderly discussion of physiognomical signs and their illustration by a range of examples drawn from his own – mostly, male – contemporaries and especially his adversaries reveal the underlying political nature of the treatise. Physiognomy, combined with rhetoric, became for Polemon an effective tool for attacking opponents and destroying their moral persona, and, to a lesser extent, for making allies with those in power. One recipient of this form of invective was Favorinus of Arles, a fellow rhetor and ambassador for Ephesus, who had also won favors with the Roman Emperors and was a bitter rival of Polemon. Polemon mentions him as person in whom “the eye is open with a shimmer like marble and a sharp gaze”, which indicates immodesty and is often found among “eunuchs born without testicles” (the passage preserved in Leiden A20 is one of the most well known in the *Physiognomy*). “The Celt”, as Polemon refers to him (the name Favorinus is supplied by Anonymous Latinus), was “greedy and immoral beyond all measure”, had many feminine features (such as soft cheeks and limbs, abundant hair, and a woman’s voice, neck, and walk), and was a “deceitful magician” and “a leader in evil and a teacher of it”. Polemon’s depiction of Favorinus as effeminate and as a monster of nature ended up being successful: Favorinus lost his imperial favors and was temporarily exiled from Rome, while Polemon’s influence – and with him, that of Smyrna – grew. And Favorinus’ example does not stand alone. By depicting the physical features of his contemporaries (not all of which were necessarily also his enemies) as being proper to women, exotic animals, or foreigners, Polemon turned many other men into objects of scorn and laughter. Even Emperor Hadrian, whose eyes are clear and shining and “full of beautiful light” and indicate good character, does not receive unambiguous praise (see Leiden A16; Swain 2007b argues that Hadrian may have been dead at the time the *Physiognomy* was published). For Polemon, the ideal human is an intelligent, manly, great-minded man (see

Leiden B24, 26, and 40), a “pure Greek” (Leiden B32; Rome does not feature explicitly in the *Physiognomy*) with features that hold a mean and that resemble those of the lion (Leiden B2), and, of course, very hard to find. With his rather negative and polemical use of examples from his own contemporaries in the handbook, Polemon offers us also a glimpse into the turbulence of his own political life and that of the Greek world of the second Sophistic. The picture that emerges is that of a highly regulated and morally sensitive society, where the elite continually competes for patronage of the Roman emperors and for status among their peers, and fears nothing more than to lose face and reputation.

The handbook might also have served a more positive purpose: the negative moral exempla with all their flaws could have been used as a starting point for moral self-improvement, the study of others as a means to acquire knowledge about oneself. As Polemon says, “if you have any memory of that [i.e., the previously described physiognomical signs of the eye], you can learn of the matter of *your soul* and of others” (see Leiden A20, my italics), the implicit suggestion being perhaps that knowledge of the principles of physiognomy and of how not to be or act can help one – not just to avoid having to deal with the moral failures of others (as expressed in Adamantius A2) – but also to avoid vice and wrongdoings in one’s own life and thus to become a better person.

The success of physiognomy in Antiquity appears to have lain in its versatility: scientists in other disciplines used and adapted its methods and suppositions about the body and soul to make it fit their own theories and purposes. For philosophers, the discipline sparked epistemological questions, but for those who already endorsed a sympathetic relationship of body and soul it also raised a practical interest, in that physiognomy could disclose the persons needing or deserving philosophical training. For physicians, physiognomy expanded

their diagnostic field from symptoms of health and disease to also include signs of character, and both could be used as a basis for medical prognoses and even for advice for cures. Moral improvement could be achieved through medical regimen, and not (just) by philosophical training. For rhetors, physiognomy proved to be a fruitful resource for improving their rhetorical skills and the effectiveness of their speeches on the audiences familiar with physiognomical thoughts and clichés. And, since physiognomy itself was morally neutral, it could be used to teach others how to become a better person while at the same time destroying your enemies and aggrandize yourself.

#### **Appendix A: The five most important source-materials on Polemon's *Physiognomy***

The contents of Polemon's *Physiognomy* have survived in a variety of independent sources and translations, among which the following five are the most important: (1) The fourth century handbook by Anonymus Latinus, mentioned above, contains – in addition to the materials from the ps.-Aristotelian handbook and Loxus – large sections from Polemon's treatise translated into Latin. (2) The Greek author Adamantius of Alexandria (also referred to as Adamantius the Sophist) from the fourth century CE 'rewrote' Polemon's handbook and excised all of Polemon's personal observations, preserving a shorter, but otherwise faithful version of the original (for the Greek text with translation, see Repath 2007a). (3) Sometime during the late eighth to the early tenth century CE, Polemon's handbook was translated in its entirety into Arabic. The original translation is now lost, but it formed the source for all the surviving Arabic reworkings of Polemon. The text that is closest to Polemon's original text in Arabic translation is probably that of MS Leiden Or. 198.1, referred to as 'the Leiden Polemon' (*Kitāb Afḥīmūn fī l-firāsa*, folios 2b–50a, dated Damascus 1356 CE; Hoyland 2007).

Both Adamantius and the Leiden Polemon order their discussion of physiognomical signs from bottom to top, thereby reflecting the order of the physiognomical signs in Treatise B of the ps.-Aristotelian *Physiognomy* and the order followed by Polemon himself. (4) From this lost Arabic translation of Polemon, we also possess an Arabic epitome from Istanbul. It is preserved in two closely related manuscripts kept in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum in Istanbul, and henceforth often referred to as the ‘Istanbul Polemon’ or the ‘Topkapı (TK) Recension’ (*Kitāb Aflīmūn fī l-firāsa wa-l-tawassum*, Ahmet III 3207 folios 33a–75a, dated 1281 CE, and *Kitāb Aflīmūn fī ‘ilm al-firāsa*, Ahmet III 3245, not dated; Ahmet III 3207, 33a–42b is translated by Gherseti 2007b). The first of these manuscripts also contains an Arabic translation of the ps.-Aristotelian *Physiognomy* and of a treatise on the physiognomy of women falsely attributed to Polemon. The TK Recension, which best preserves the original lost Arabic translation, is more ‘Islamicized’ than the Leiden Polemon: the ordering of physiognomical signs is from top to bottom, which is the order that is typical of the great medical treatises of the Arabic tradition of that period, and it substitutes anecdotes and references to the Greek contemporaries and culture of Polemon with elements from the Islamic world (for a comparison of the Arabic sources for Polemon, see Gherseti & Swain 2007). (5) Finally, Polemon’s treatise was also translated into Syriac (either in the fifth or in the sixth century CE), and citations from this now lost translation are preserved in a thirteenth century encyclopedia called *The Cream of Wisdom*, by bishop Bar Hebraeus.

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