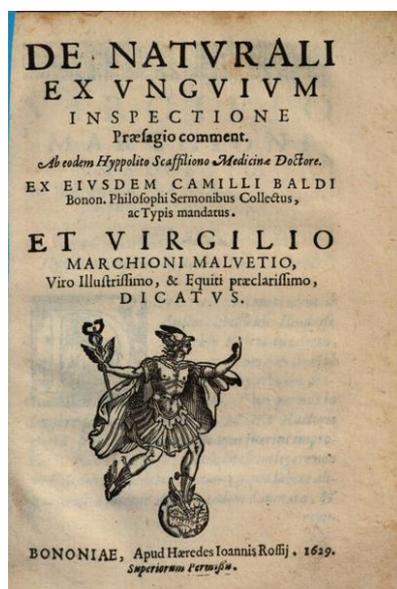
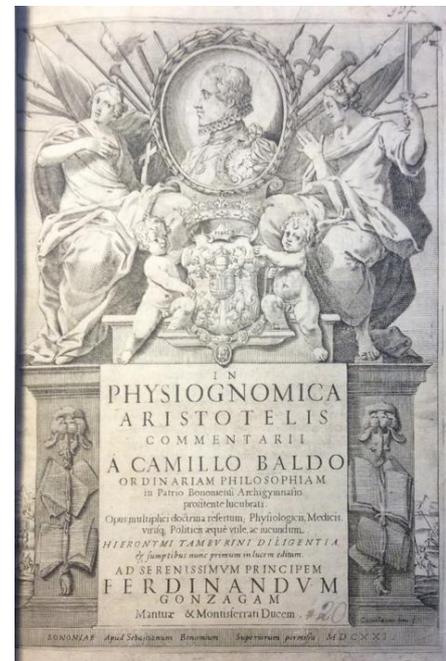


Camillo Baldi (1550-1637), *In Physiognomica Aristotelis Commentarii* [Commentaries on Aristotle's Physiognomics], Bologna 1621

The Latin text is available [here](#)

Introduction

“You recognise a lion from the claw”, writes Camillo Baldi (1550-1637) at the beginning of his treatise on the physiognomic inspection of the nails (*De naturali ex unguium inspectione praesagio commentarius* [Commentary on the Natural Prognostic Based on the Inspection of the Nails], Bologna 1629). But is it equally possible to foreknow human nature by inspecting the nails of a human being, asks Baldi? Professor of philosophy and of medicine in Bologna, Baldi's interest in physiognomics is central to much of his work. His most important publication on physiognomics is the *Commentaries on Aristotle's Physiognomics* (1621), from which the extract below is taken. In this work, he asserts that physiognomics is essential for public life, and that it is a most useful political tool – a topic on which he also touches in other writings, such as *Politiche considerazioni sopra una lettera d'Anton Perez al Duca di Lerma* [Political Considerations on a Letter by Anton Perez to the Duke of Lerma], Milan 1625), which focuses on life at court. At the same time he is concerned with the method of



physiognomic study, and insists that physiognomics properly understood is a scientific endeavour, appropriate to a physician or a natural philosopher – and indeed he uses the terms ‘physicus’ (natural philosopher) and ‘physiognomus’ (physiognomist) essentially as synonyms. The Aristotelian foundations of this discipline are extremely important to Baldi, who also commented on other Aristotelian works, showing a particular interest in ethics and politics.

But what about the hands, or more specifically the nails? Is it possible to predict human nature by inspecting them? Baldi answers in the affirmative, but is very careful to distinguish between what he perceives to be the acceptable, scientific method for this, and the divinatory, arbitrary readings of the chiromants. In the selected passage from the *Commentaries on Aristotle's Physiognomics* he draws a line between physiognomics – a scientific approach – and chiromancy (the reading of the lines on the palm of the hand) and metoposcopy (the reading of the lines on the forehead), which he radically condemns, while showing very detailed knowledge of the terminology used by both disciplines. Baldi's *Commentaries* stand out especially for the clarity of the argumentation. The book offers the perspective of a philosopher-physician on the great benefits of physiognomics, if studied thoroughly as a science enabling informed conjectures; but Baldi does not claim that it can provide certain, necessary knowledge.



Preface

Aim, division, usefulness, and method of this booklet

Aristotle's aim in this book is to consider those signs which appear naturally on the human body, from which the inclinations and dispositions of the human soul can be known with a degree of probability. Physiognomics, as the name says, is accordingly knowledge of nature. But applied specifically to the human being we say that it is knowledge of human nature, that is to say of the inclinations of the human soul (indeed the soul is the form, and the form the nature) by way of external signs that appear to the senses. The subject matter of this knowledge are the accidental, natural qualities of the human bodies, that is those that do not derive from an external cause, but from the power which forms and gives shape, and from the internal principle. The goal of this process is to know in whatever manner the nature and inclinations of the soul via these signs. From this it is evident that this knowledge will not only be useful for medical purposes, but that for active and civic life in its entirety it will be extremely useful to know with whom we are dealing, so as not to mistake a stone or a scorpion for bread. [...]

This is indeed a kind of 'a posteriori' teaching, working from signs and by way of similitudes. Since it is based on two weak principles, this knowledge cannot lead to any necessary conclusion. The first of these is the conversion of the sequence¹ of a universal, affirmative proposition: indeed, it does not follow that if all timid people have soft hair, therefore all those who have soft hair are timid.² The other principle is not less weak, because it does not follow that if somebody has a bovine face, and the ox is dull witted, then this person will be dull witted, too. This is a paralogism, and these are four terms from which nothing can be deduced. If you say that every human being with a bovine face is dull witted, and then you negate it, you won't be able to prove the sentence you negated according to the principles of this art, unless perhaps you assume that nature always operates in the same way if it doesn't encounter an impediment. And you won't be able to ascertain if something does impede it or not. From this is clear that no limit can be set to free will by these things, neither is it necessary that somebody with soft hair will be completely timid. Therefore I think that this whole booklet can to some extent be summed up in three propositions. The first is that soul and body are conjoined and connected into a unity, and for this reason the passions of the soul are associated with bodily passions in a one-to-one relation, and both are affections of the compound. The second proposition is that those who have certain passions of the soul will also present certain accidental qualities on the body. The third proposition is that those who have certain accidental qualities of the body will usually also have certain passions and inclinations of the soul.

But those who have a terrible opinion of physiognomics and who think that it belongs to the kind of evil, magical arts prohibited by the laws, which dare to say something certain about specific, contingent future events, so that they are counted among the prophetic arts, consider physiognomics no less groundless and false than chiromancy, geomancy and metoposcopy and such. They claim that it is impossible for human beings to know and examine the intimate

¹ 'Conversio in terminis': this refers in logic to the conversion of the subject into a predicate and vice versa.

² This is a classical example used in the Pseudoaristotelian *Physiognomonica* (806b6-8): 'Soft hair shows timidity and stiff hair courage. This is based on observation of all the animal kingdom. For the deer, the hare and the sheep are the most timid of all animals and have the softest hair; the lion and wild boar are the bravest and have stiff hair' (Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, in *Minor Works*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge MA 1955), p. 93).



affections of the human soul, which are only known to God. It is easy to respond to this perplexity. For physiognomics diverges from those prohibited kinds of knowledge and is very different from them. And the reasonings brought against it will be countered, if we grant that there are two kinds of specific, contingent future things. One regards things that happen in the majority of cases and have some cause, while the other is a kind of indefinite contingency and does not have any cause unless accidentally.³ Physiognomics deals with the first kind, and does not touch the second kind of contingent things. Furthermore physiognomics considers the things that are in the soul or come from it, such that carry a sign on the body. Indeed what does not leave a sign on the body, like thoughts and acquired dispositions, are not known by the physiognomist. Also the physiognomist does not state anything certain about those things, neither is this knowledge restricted to a certain time or space, but in general the physiognomist says that nothing forbids that with regard to the things which have certain signs quite the opposite could follow.

To these reasonings we therefore say that there are two types of physiognomics, one which proceeds on the basis of natural signs and deals with human inclinations, and the passions which are common to body and soul, and this kind is not prohibited by law. The other kind is properly called metoposcopy, and this considers the lines of the forehead and the characters of the face. Similarly, chiromancy considers the lines of the hand. Both of these are equally to be condemned, first because they don't adduce a necessary or probable cause of their prophecies, neither can they adduce one, second because they arrogantly claim to be able to make certain predictions about these contingent, individual things which depend on divine or human will, such as the prediction that someone will become Cardinal, or that somebody will be in prison on a certain month, or will be injured by dagger or with a stone: I said elsewhere that since these things are nowhere before they have happened, it is impossible to know them, and if eventually they are correctly prophesied and these people will have said the truth, for the one time the truth will have corresponded to the prediction, a thousand lies are to be expected.

Physiognomists do not inspect those things that depend on divine or human will, nor do they examine human actions, but simply conjecture from the signs that appear on the body, just how the faculties of the soul might be arranged. But you add that metoposcopy and chiromancy, too, consider the signs of the body, and that from these they deliberate what will happen. I reply that in general physiognomic signs become visible and can be demonstrated a priori from internal principles that determine the individuals. But chiromantic signs are accidental, and don't arise from the principles of the individual, and cannot be established by any reasoning; and the reason is that they are mutable and don't always remain fixed. Therefore in physiognomics, too, those signs that are not permanent are to be rejected, and no trust should be placed in them. Indeed the signs on the forehead and on the hand do change, as experts of chiromancy and metoposcopy claim. But nobody will be able to doubt that the lines on the hands do not derive from compressing the hand and from the corrugation of the skin, and that the lines on the forehead derive from its own movement, since it is the only mobile skin in our body.

³ Baldi uses technical vocabulary, opposing 'contingentia ad utrumlibet' to 'ut in pluribus': see S. Knuuttila, 'Medieval Modal Theories and Modal Logic', in *Handbook of the History of Logic. Vol II*, eds D.M. Gabbay and J. Woods (Amsterdam/Boston 2008), pp. 505-78.