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Quotes by Lichtenberg, Georg C.

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Georg Christoph Lichtenberg , 1742-99, German physicist and satirist. He taught at the Univ. of Göttingen, where his special field was electricity.

Lichtenberg made several visits to England and was influenced by the satire of Swift and by the English theater. He satirized the pseudoscience of Lavater and attacked the Sturm und Drang writers. He also wrote witty commentaries on Hogarth's engravings.

It is in the gift for employing all the vicissitudes of life to one's own advantage and to that of one's craft that a large part of genius consists.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Affectation is a very good word when someone does not wish to confess to what he would none the less like to believe of himself.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

One is rarely an impulsive innovator after the age of sixty, but one can still be a very fine orderly and inventive thinker. One rarely procreates children at that age, but one is all the more skilled at educating those who have already been procreated, and education is procreation of another kind.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He was then in his fifty-fourth year, when even in the case of poets reason and passion begin to discuss a peace treaty and usually conclude it not very long afterwards.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Once the good man was dead, one wore his hat and another his sword as he had worn them, a third had himself barbered as he had, a fourth walked as he did, but the honest man that he was -- nobody any longer wanted to be that.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If we make a couple of discoveries here and there we need not believe things will go on like this for ever. Just as we hit water when we dig in the earth, so we discover the incomprehensible sooner or later.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If all mankind were suddenly to practice honesty, many thousands of people would be sure to starve.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

What is the good of drawing conclusions from experience? I don't deny we sometimes draw the right conclusions, but don't we just as often draw the wrong ones?

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We can see nothing whatever of the soul unless it is visible in the expression of the countenance; one might call the faces at a large assembly of people a history of the

human soul written in a kind of Chinese ideograms.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Once we know our weaknesses they cease to do us any harm.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The pleasures of the imagination are as it were only drawings and models which are played with by poor people who cannot afford the real thing.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Even truth needs to be clad in new garments if it is to appeal to a new age.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He who says he hates every kind of flattery, and says it in earnest, certainly does not yet know every kind of flattery.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If there were only turnips and potatoes in the world, someone would complain that plants grow the wrong way.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Food probably has a very great influence on the condition of men. Wine exercises a more visible influence, food does it more slowly but perhaps just as surely. Who knows if a

well-prepared soup was not responsible for the pneumatic pump or a poor one for a war?

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A clever child brought up with a foolish one can itself become foolish. Man is so perfectible and corruptible he can become a fool through good sense.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man is a masterpiece of creation if for no other reason than that, all the weight of evidence for determinism notwithstanding, he believes he has free will.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

What most clearly characterizes true freedom and its true employment is its misemployment.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

What I do not like about our definitions of genius is that there is in them nothing of the day of judgment, nothing of resounding through eternity and nothing of the footsteps of the Almighty.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Everyone is a genius at least once a year; a real genius has his original ideas closer together.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man can acquire accomplishments or he can become an animal, whichever he wants.

God makes the animals, man makes himself.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There are people who possess not so much genius as a certain talent for perceiving the desires of the century, or even of the decade, before it has done so itself.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

One might call habit a moral friction: something that prevents the mind from gliding over things but connects it with them and makes it hard for it to free itself from them.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Of all the inventions of man I doubt whether any was more easily accomplished than that of a Heaven.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

What is called an acute knowledge of human nature is mostly nothing but the observer's own weaknesses reflected back from others.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

That man is the noblest creature may also be inferred from the fact that no other creature has yet contested this claim.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If you are going to build something in the air it is always better to build castles than houses of cards.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Ideas too are a life and a world.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

I believe that man is in the last resort so free a being that his right to be what he believes himself to be cannot be contested.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

To do the opposite of something is also a form of imitation, namely an imitation of its opposite.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man is always partial and is quite right to be. Even impartiality is partial.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Nothing can contribute more to peace of soul than the lack of any opinion whatever.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The greatest events occur without intention playing any part in them; chance makes good mistakes and undoes the most carefully planned undertaking. The world's greatest events are not produced, they happen.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If all else fails, the character of a man can be recognized by nothing so surely as by a jest which he takes badly.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The journalists have constructed for themselves a little wooden chapel, which they also call the Temple of Fame, in which they put up and take down portraits all day long and make such a hammering you can't hear yourself speak.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Erudition can produce foliage without bearing fruit.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Before we blame we should first see whether we cannot excuse.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

It is almost everywhere the case that soon after it is begotten the greater part of human wisdom is laid to rest in repositories.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If an angel were ever to tell us anything of his philosophy I believe many propositions would sound like 2 times 2 equals 13.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If moderation is a fault, then indifference is a crime.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

To receive applause for works which do not demand all our powers hinders our advance towards a perfecting of our spirit. It usually means that thereafter we stand still.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Actual aristocracy cannot be abolished by any law: all the law can do is decree how it is to be imparted and who is to acquire it.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A good metaphor is something even the police should keep an eye on.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

With a pen in my hand I have successfully stormed bulwarks from which others armed with sword and excommunication have been repulsed.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

So-called professional mathematicians have, in their reliance on the relative incapacity of the rest of mankind, acquired for themselves a reputation for profundity very similar to the reputation for sanctity possessed by theologians.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Much can be inferred about a man from his mistress: in her one beholds his weaknesses and his dreams.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

To err is human also in so far as animals seldom or never err, or at least only the cleverest of them do so.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Every man has his moral backside which he refrains from showing unless he has to and keeps covered as long as possible with the trousers of decorum.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

It is a question whether, when we break a murderer on the wheel, we do not fall into the error a child makes when it hits the chair it has bumped into.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We cannot remember too often that when we observe nature, and especially the ordering of nature, it is always ourselves alone we are observing.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If people should ever start to do only what is necessary millions would die of hunger.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The American who first discovered Columbus made a bad discovery.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Be wary of passing the judgment: obscure. To find something obscure poses no difficulty: elephants and poodles find many things obscure.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

I have remarked very clearly that I am often of one opinion when I am lying down and of another when I am standing up...

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man is a gregarious animal and much more so in his mind than in his body. A golden rule; judge men not by their opinions but by what their opinions have made of them.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We accumulate our opinions at an age when our understanding is at its weakest.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A handful of soldiers is always better than a mouthful of arguments.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We are obliged to regard many of our original minds as crazy at least until we have become as clever as they are.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man is to be found in reason, God in the passions.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

In each of us there is a little of all of us.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

I am convinced we do not only love ourselves in others but hate ourselves in others too.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We often have need of a profound philosophy to restore to our feelings their original state of innocence, to find our way out of the rubble of things alien to us, to begin to feel for ourselves and to speak ourselves, and I might almost say to exist ourselves.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If this is philosophy it is at any rate a philosophy that is not in its right mind.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Astronomy is perhaps the science whose discoveries owe least to chance, in which human understanding appears in its whole magnitude, and through which man can best learn how small he is.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A man is never more serious than when he praise himself.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

It is hardly to be believed how spiritual reflections when mixed with a little physics can hold people's attention and give them a livelier idea of God than do the often ill-applied examples of his wrath.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Prejudices are so to speak the mechanical instincts of men: through their prejudices they do without any effort many things they would find too difficult to think through to the point of resolving to do them.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The most dangerous untruths are truths slightly distorted.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There exists a species of transcendental ventriloquism by means of which men can be made to believe that something said on earth comes from Heaven.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

With prophecies the commentator is often a more important man than the prophet.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We say that someone occupies an official position, whereas it is the official position that occupies him.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

If another Messiah was born he could hardly do so much good as the printing-press.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Reason now gazes above the realm of the dark but warm feelings as the Alpine peaks do above the clouds. They behold the sun more clearly and distinctly, but they are cold and unfruitful.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There is no more important rule of conduct in the world than this: attach yourself as much as you can to people who are abler than you and yet not so very different that you cannot understand them.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

It is said that truth comes from the mouths of fools and children: I wish every good mind which feels an inclination for satire would reflect that the finest satirist always has

something of both in him.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

One cannot demand of a scholar that he show himself a scholar everywhere in society, but the whole tenor of his behavior must none the less betray the thinker, he must always be instructive, his way of judging a thing must even in the smallest matters be such that people can see what it will amount to when, quietly and self-collected, he puts this power to scholarly use.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

People often become scholars for the same reason they become soldiers: simply because they are unfit for any other station. Their right hand has to earn them a livelihood; one might say they lie down like bears in winter and seek sustenance from their paws.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The most heated defenders of a science, who cannot endure the slightest sneer at it, are commonly those who have not made very much progress in it and are secretly aware of this defect.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There is no greater impediment to progress in the sciences than the desire to see it take place too quickly.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He was always smoothing and polishing himself, and in the end he became blunt before he was sharp.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

To grow wiser means to learn to know better and better the faults to which this instrument with which we feel and judge can be subject.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The noble simplicity in the works of nature only too often originates in the noble shortsightedness of him who observes it.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Cautiousness in judgment is nowadays to be recommended to each and every one: if we gained only one incontestable truth every ten years from each of our philosophical writers the harvest we reaped would be sufficient.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There are people who believe everything is sane and sensible that is done with a solemn face.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Just as the performance of the vilest and most wicked deeds requires spirit and talent, so even the greatest demand a certain insensitivity which under other circumstances we would call stupidity.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

First we have to believe, and then we believe.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

With most people disbelief in a thing is founded on a blind belief in some other thing.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

With the majority of people unbelief in one thing is founded on the blind belief in another.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Many things about our bodies would not seem to us so filthy and obscene if we did not have the idea of nobility in our heads.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There are very many people who read simply to prevent themselves from thinking.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Do we write books so that they shall merely be read? Don't we also write them for employment in the household? For one that is read from start to finish, thousands are leafed through, other thousands lie motionless, others are jammed against mouseholes, thrown at rats, others are stood on, sat on, drummed on, have gingerbread baked on them or are used to light pipes.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A vacuum of ideas affects people differently than a vacuum of air, otherwise readers of books would be constantly collapsing.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A book is a mirror: If an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle to look out.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

It is no great art to say something briefly when, like Tacitus, one has something to say; when one has nothing to say, however, and none the less writes a whole book and makes truth into a liar -- that I call an achievement.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A person reveals his character by nothing so clearly as the joke he resents.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Here take back the stuff that I am, nature, knead it back into the dough of being, make of me a bush, a cloud, whatever you will, even a man, only no longer make me.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The most perfect ape cannot draw an ape; only man can do that; but, likewise, only man regards the ability to do this as a sign of superiority.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The great rule: If the little bit you have is nothing special in itself, at least find a way of saying it that is a little bit special.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Good taste is either that which agrees with my taste or that which subjects itself to the rule of reason. From this we can see how useful it is to employ reason in seeking out the laws of taste.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

A schoolteacher or professor cannot educate individuals, he educates only species.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Most subjects at universities are taught for no other purpose than that they may be re-taught when the students become teachers.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The most successful tempters and thus the most dangerous are the deluded deluders.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Theologians always try to turn the Bible into a book without common sense.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Delight at having understood a very abstract and obscure system leads most people to believe in the truth of what it demonstrates.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Some theories are good for nothing except to be argued about.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The human tendency to regard little things as important has produced very many great things.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

As the few adepts in such things well know, universal morality is to be found in little everyday penny-events just as much as in great ones. There is so much goodness and ingenuity in a raindrop that an apothecary wouldn't let it go for less than half-a-crown...

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Rational free spirits are the light brigade who go on ahead and reconnoiter the ground which the heavy brigade of the orthodox will eventually occupy.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

People who never have any time on their hands are those who do the least.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Virtue by premeditation isn't worth much.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

We have no words for speaking of wisdom to the stupid. He who understands the wise is wise already.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He swallowed a lot of wisdom, but all of it seems to have gone down the wrong way.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The worst thing you can possibly do is worrying and thinking about what you could have done.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

As I take up my pen I feel myself so full, so equal to my subject, and see my book so clearly before me in embryo, I would almost like to try to say it all in a single word.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Nowadays three witty turns of phrase and a lie make a writer.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The sure conviction that we could if we wanted to is the reason so many good minds are

idle.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He who is in love with himself has at least this advantage -- he won't encounter many rivals.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

There were honest people long before there were Christians and there are, God be praised, still honest people where there are no Christians. It could therefore easily be possible that people are Christians because true Christianity corresponds to what they would have been even if Christianity did not exist.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

Man loves company, even if it is only that of a smoldering candle.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

He who is enamored of himself will at least have the advantage of being inconvenienced by few rivals.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

To be content with life -- or to live merrily, rather --all that is required is that we bestow on all things only a fleeting, superficial glance; the more thoughtful we become the more earnest we grow.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.

The fly that does not want to be swatted is safest if it sits on the fly-swat.

- Lichtenberg, Georg C.



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