

WHEN HEADS WERE HEADLINES

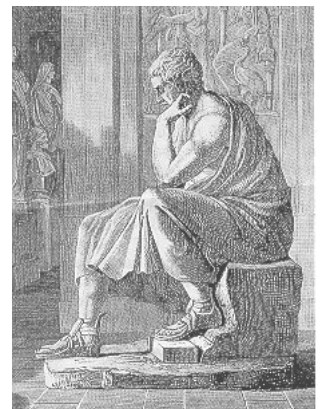
Anthony A. Walsh, Ph.D.

"Of Dr. Gall, and his skulls, who has not heard?" a British journalist wrote in 1803, and with that rhetorical question published the first account in English of a new psychological theory. The writer was referring to the German physician, Franz Joseph Gall (1758- 1828, at right), who had just created what became one of the most controversial, bizarre, influential, and enduring theories of human nature to be seen in the past two hundred years. For, it was Gall and his student Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832) who settled an issue, which, today to us seems self-evident. They concluded that the mind was located in the brain and not in the heart, spinal cord, or kidneys as others before them had believed.



Gall and Spurzheim (at left) then proposed that the brain controlled behavior, that the brain's size and shape could be judged by examining the skull, and that this examination could tell about a person's talents, inclinations, inner character, and intelligence. An examiner could determine, that is, whether a person would lead an honest, dishonest, evil, good, destructive, loving, religious or other sort of life. What we know today as phrenology--and group with other questionable sciences such as astrology and palmistry--originated with them.

Theories about the structure and function of the human mind and brain have been proposed throughout history. Additionally, people have always thought it possible to judge a person's inner character based on an external sign whether it was a special "look" in their eyes, their body build, or the clothes they wore. Speculation on these matters over the years, however, has ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (below) believed the back part of the human skull was empty, the brain was located in the front part only, and the brain's chief function was to serve as a cooling system for the heat generated by the heart, which was the "chief organ of the body and the center for thought." Plato divided the human mind into three parts centering some functions in the brain but most others in the spinal cord. The Egyptians and the Ancient Hebrews claimed "thinking" and the "emotions" took place in the heart while the kidneys controlled decision-making. Aristotle also believed we could learn about a person's inner character by examining the shape of their body, the shape of their head, or the appearance of their face. His theory, known then and today as physiognomy, proposed that to the extent people looked like particular animals they would possess the character or behavioral traits of those animals. This idea survives in our language today in such character



describing adjectives as "asinine"--to be like an ass in appearance or behavior (stubborn and stupid); "leonine"-- to be like a lion in both action and appearance (strong and regal); or "porcine"--to be pig-like (sloppy and gluttonous). Following Aristotle's lead physiognomists became even more absurd and attempts were made to judge human character by examining moles on the body, fingernails, lines in the forehead, feet, and the human face, often with special reference to the nose, the mouth, or the eyes.

Modern science accepts the fact that the brain and mind work as one, and psychology has legitimized the idea that a relationship does exist between a person's personality (or temperament) and their body build--such as being tall and thin versus being short and stocky versus being muscular and athletic and being reclusive, focused on food, or a regular "jock" respectively. But, in the early 1800's when Gall and Spurzheim proposed that the mind and brain were one and that an examination of the external surface of the skull could provide an accurate picture of the brain (mind, or character indices) within this was not the case. It had been over 2,000 years since Aristotle described his views on physiognomy and on the location of the human mind and the mind issue, in particular, was still being debated. Gall and Spurzheim settled it once and for all.

Beyond concluding the mind was in the brain, Gall and Spurzheim's phrenology was based on several key assumptions. The first of these held since the brain was the location of the mind it was possible to understand the mind's powers by studying the brain. By doing this, they believed we could have direct access to the innermost secrets of human nature. Second, they believed the mind was composed of as many as thirty-five inborn mental faculties--or primary powers-- and each one of these in turn was specifically located within the brain as a separate "cerebral organ." Third, they proposed that within each of us certain faculties were stronger than others and that we in turn had some faculties stronger or weaker than those possessed by someone else. Fourth, it was assumed that the size and shape of the brain conformed so closely to the size and shape of the skull that a phrenologist could examine the external surface of the skull and make judgments about the size, shape, strength or latent potential of the mental faculties within. Finally, Gall and Spurzheim were convinced that even though we all were born



with some faculties or talents stronger than others these could be changed through education. Through education we could improve our character by increasing the activity of our "good" faculties and diminishing the activity of the "bad." Later phrenologists believed in this optimistic idea so firmly that they became convinced that a person's head would actually change shape during his lifetime demonstrating the shifts in dominance of the faculties of the mind within.

In Spurzheim's phrenological system, which expanded Gall's, each of the mental faculties was assigned a technical sounding name such as AMATIVENESS--the inborn "propensity" for sexual love; or DESTRUCTIVENESS--the inborn "propensity" for aggression; or, VENERATION--the inborn "sentiment" controlling our belief in God. Each faculty, moreover, was assigned a specific location within the brain and on the external surface of the skull where a trained phrenologist's eye could "read" it and judge its strength. DESTRUCTIVENESS, for

example, was located just above the ear and people with wide heads were described as having strong aggressive tendencies. AMATIVENESS was located externally in the nape of the neck. People with broad, thick, necks were held to be highly amorous. VENERATION was located on the crown of the head and was the uppermost "sentiment" closest to God. People who were highly reverent would have pointed heads.

Phrenology made its transatlantic journey early in the 1800's. At that time, during its "scientific phase," it was studied mainly by doctors. Although it is not generally well known, both Gall and Spurzheim made many accurate and lasting contributions to our knowledge of brain function even though the "science of phrenology" as it ultimately came to be practiced was shown to be scientifically invalid. Nevertheless, in 1822 a group of Philadelphia physicians formed America's first Phrenological Society and in the years that immediately followed phrenology was seriously researched. By 1832, however, interest in it had diminished and what the "new science" needed was a phrenological kick in the head. Spurzheim's arrival in Boston in August of that year did the trick.

The year 1832 was an exciting one for our young democracy only fifty-six years of age at the time. Exciting technological advances were taking place daily. For example, Obett Hussy's reaping machine appeared this year as did the first horse-drawn streetcars in New York City. Americans of this period, moreover, had an almost insatiable thirst for novelty. They were interested in all the new wonders of science that promised to make life easier, healthier, or more understandable. When phrenology promised to explain the more mysterious side of human nature in a way that was at once practical and intellectually manageable it aroused wide public interest. When Spurzheim himself came to Boston to tell Bostonians about it firsthand, furthermore, it was as if Aristotle or Hippocrates or Isaac Newton had personally come to that "Hub" of the intellectual universe. Spurzheim was treated royally and was lionized by Boston's intellectual elite.

Spurzheim's visit to Boston became a turning point for phrenology in America. Through a series of public lectures he was able to generate a great deal of enthusiasm for the new science, acquire converts, and stimulate the publication of phrenological books and pamphlets. His public lectures were covered widely in the press and the news of his teachings spread across the land. His missionary zeal, however, led him to disregard his health and early in November he quite suddenly died.

Bostonians loved Spurzheim so much that after his death--which was described in newspapers as a "public calamity"--they gave him a hero's funeral. A Phrenological Society was immediately formed to perpetuate his teachings and soon received for its museum Spurzheim's own skull and brain, left to science by the great man, to prove to his critics that his theories were true.

At about the same time, a group of students studying for the ministry at Amherst College in Western Massachusetts scheduled a debate on the question "Is phrenology entitled to the name of Science?" The organizers, hoping to settle the issue once and for all, engaged the soon-to-be-famous theologian, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887 at right), to take the position on the negative. To their surprise Beecher became a convert too and following the debate asked a classmate, Orson Fowler, "Fowler, would you like to read my Phrenological works?" "Yes, indeed," was Fowler's eager reply and then-and there the name of Fowler and the science of phrenology became



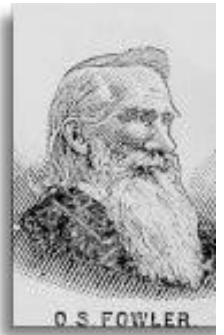
wedded, and the history of phrenology itself forever changed by the marriage, for the next 100 years.

Although Gall and Spurzheim had received fees for their public lectures, and in fact supported themselves in this manner, the idea of turning phrenology into a profitable business never occurred to them. To do this it took someone with a more acquisitive business mind, someone with Yankee ingenuity, a touch of showmanship, and a bit of P.T. Barnum in him. It took Orson Squire Fowler to discover that people would line up and pay to have their innermost secrets of character read from their heads by a professor of the "new science of the mind" (even though a self-proclaimed one), a professor who more often than not would tell them something nice about themselves.

Fowler began his career as a phrenologist when he printed up a thousand copies of a "Phrenological Chart" defining the mental faculties, prepared a handbill, obtained a plaster demonstrative head upon which the faculties were marked, and, with \$32 worth of phrenology publications in hand joined the most popular entertainers of the period on the eastern seaboard lecture circuit. He "threw out his card" for the first time in Brattleboro, Vermont. Convincing his audience that this new science had the potential to explain nearly all the mysteries of the



universe he cleared forty dollars the first day. He immediately had his brother Lorenzo (1811-1896) join him and the two took to the road. Through them, America very suddenly became head-conscious--heads became headlines--and ladies began to adopt hairstyles designed to show off their best phrenological organs. What had been a "science" understood by relatively few was infused with Yankee practicality. Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, billing themselves as "Practical Phrenologists," turned phrenology the "pure" science into phrenology the "applied." In the process, they made the doctrine accessible to a wider audience and developed its utilitarian potential beyond anything Gall or Spurzheim could have imagined.



The Fowler brothers were remarkably insightful regarding human nature beyond the purely phrenological. They had a very real ability to "read" people. They were able to dazzle their audiences with their accurate character analyses often revealing the darker side of some otherwise strait-laced local figure. The "Phrenological Charts" which they employed--and which would be given to a customer to keep--included a table on which they rated the "strength" of each mental faculty on a seven-point scale from "very small" to "very large." In addition to these ratings made on the basis of the digital manipulation of the subjects head, they added to the scientific guise of their demonstrations by measuring the head in great detail, evaluating the person's temperament, and otherwise "reading" all that they could about the subject based on his overall appearance and manners. Rarely did they "read bumps" in the sense implied by critics who called their science "bumpology."

In meetinghouses from Providence, Rhode Island to Hannibal, Missouri the Fowler Brothers peddled their new science. Soon too they were being imitated--the highest form of flattery as the saying goes--and the country became deluged with traveling phrenologists. No village went untaught, untapped, or unread regarding the phrenological characters of its residents. The

itinerant, or "peripatetic phrenologist" became a fixture of the 19th century American rural scene. Mark Twain (at right, 1835-1910) recalled it this way in his Autobiography:



One of the most frequent arrivals in our village of Hannibal was the peripatetic phrenologist and he was popular and always welcome. He gathered the people together and gave them a gratis lecture on the marvels of phrenology, then felt their bumps and made an estimate of the result, at twenty-five cents per head. I think the people were almost always satisfied with these translations of their characters--if one may properly use that word in this connection and indeed the word is right enough, for the estimates really were translations, since they conveyed seeming facts out of apparent simplicities into unsimple technical forms of expression, although as a rule their meanings got left behind on the journey. Phrenology found many a bump on a man's head and it labeled each bump with a formidable and outlandish name of its own. The phrenologist took delight in mouthing these great names; they gurgled from his lips in an easy and unembarrassed stream, and this exhibition of cultivated facility compelled the envy and admiration of everybody. By and by the people became familiar with these strange names and addicted to the use of them and they batted them back and forth in conversation with deep satisfaction--a satisfaction which could hardly have been more contenting if they had known for certain what the words meant.

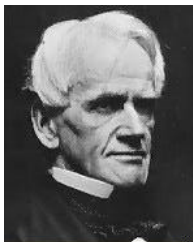
In 1838 Orson Fowler opened an office in Philadelphia where walk-in clients could have their characters read. It soon became common practice to visit him--like visiting the dentist--to find out, for example, whether you and your bride-to-be were phrenologically compatible, whether young Jimmy should continue in school or become an able seaman, or to determine from the "professor" what hidden talents remained untapped within your own brain. In this same year Fowler founded the *AMERICAN PHRENOLOGICAL JOURNAL AND MISCELLANY*, a periodical devoted to popularizing the science, and it remained in print until 1911. Shortly thereafter he moved his business to New York City where his brother Lorenzo and a third party, Samuel Wells, joined him.

The Fowlers and Wells business, phrenology as industry, was exceptionally complex. Their New York Offices at Clinton Hall included a vast museum housing over 1,000 whole head casts as well as masks in-plaster of well-known character types--both good and evil--illustrative of phrenological science. This collection of curiosities became a landmark in New York City rivaled only by another New York museum run by P.T. Barnum. Visitors to Fowlers and Wells could enroll in courses of instruction on phrenology, have their character read, or purchase books on the subject while selecting from a variety of "scientific" paraphernalia for sale for home use. Starter kits were also available for the budding "professor" who wished to set up a business on his own. In 1866 the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PHRENOLOGY was incorporated here to grant diplomas in phrenology. By 1882 two hundred and forty students had graduated and were spreading the "good phrenological word" across the land--AND raking in fees! But the most lucrative component of the business was publishing.



Fowlers & Wells was a respectable 19th century publisher. The members of the corporation changed from time-to-time over the years altering its name and a British branch, which opened in 1863, has descended to this day as L.N. Fowler & Co.--although no Fowlers are presently involved. The firm published books and pamphlets on a variety of subjects; but, for the most part, it was the standard bearer for phrenological works and works on just about every other health reform movement of the period. One of their lesser-known accomplishments involved the distribution of Walt Whitman's (at left, 1819-1892) LEAVES OF GRASS in 1855 complete with his phrenological analysis.

The Fowler family members were all deeply involved in the firm's operations and the company regularly published their often overstated pronouncements on everything from suffrage, to child rearing, to vegetarianism, to the evils of too tight corsets, tobacco, and alcohol. Orson, however, was the most prolific writer of them all and preceded Freud in shocking Victorian America with his liberal views on sexuality. His most famous book on the topic entitled CREATIVE AND SEXUAL SCIENCE published in 1870 has just been republished.

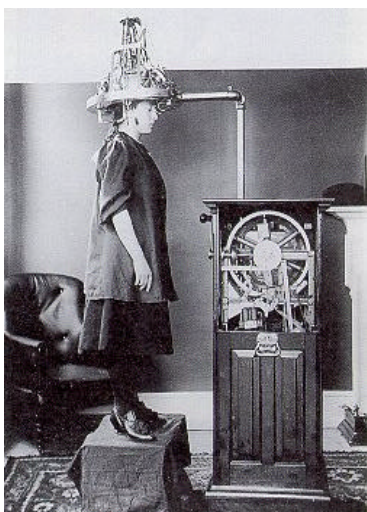


Phrenology reached its peak in this country after the Civil War. But by that time most serious scientists had long abandoned it even though it continued to influence a great many aspects of American life. Phrenology's teachings had been-incorporated in education--Horace Mann (1796-1859, at left) was convinced of its utility for educators--, in prison reform, in psychiatry--many of the founders of what is today the American Psychiatric Association were phrenologists early in life--, and in literature--phrenological allusions can be found in the writings of Poe, Melville, George Eliot, and Harriet Beecher Stowe to name a few.

In 1901 under the banner that read "The Revival of Phrenology" Bernard Hollander sought to rekindle interest in phrenology by publishing detailed medical records of eight hundred cases "proving" the science to be true, but to no avail. At about the same time the famous British naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace (at right, 1823-1913) in his book THE WONDERFUL CENTURY quite forcefully stated that one of the main errors of 19th century science was its failure to recognize the truthfulness of phrenology. The name Fowler and phrenology continued in New York City until the death of



Lorenzo's daughter, Jessie Allen, in 1932. Her adamant belief in what was then the "old science of the mind" had become an anachronism having been replaced by new "new sciences" of "Behaviorism" and "Psychoanalysis." But beliefs die hard when there is a grain of truth involved or grain of mystery shrouding them. Such was the case with phrenology.



At the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago visitors were given the opportunity to visit the "Temple of Phrenology" next to Ripley's Believe-it-or-not and a flea circus and be analyzed by the newest wonder of that age, the mechanical PSYCHOGRAPH (at left). This machine resembled an old-fashioned hair drier with metal probes (or fingers) protruding from its inner hemispherical

surface. Placing a client's head within it the probes would be adjusted to "read" the contours of his skull printing out--in computer fashion--a psychographic analysis billed as "The Guide O'Life." This apparatus was displayed on the Johnny Carson Show in the late 1960's but the reading of Johnny's head turned out less phrenologically attractive than the reading obtained by having the machine "read" a melon.

The last British Phrenological Society--a society established in the 19th century--closed up its calipers, put away its tapes, and discarded its plaster heads only about twenty years ago. It was, perhaps, the last remnant of "legitimacy" phrenology-as-science saw. But, one can still find a "professor" of phrenology at a country fair or on some out-of-the-way place in rural America. Up until a few years ago, in fact, a Phrenologist conducted a regular practice on a street corner in downtown Boston. Furthermore, a recent (24-September-2000) *subject* search for "phrenology" at www.bn.com (Barnes & Noble online) produced 7 items that are considered "current and available" and 287 items out-of-print but also available for purchase. Additionally, entering the word "phrenology" in any of the internet search engines will pull up numerous sites devoted to this topic including "The Phrenology Page" linked [here](#). The possibility that we may still use external clues to understand the inner person is as intriguing to us today, it appears (even if some of that curiosity is purely historical), as it was to Aristotle over 2,000 years ago and as it was to our more recent ancestors when heads were headlines.



September 12, 1999(1982)

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Walsh, Anthony A. Ph.D. "The 'New Science of the Mind' and the Philadelphia Physicians in the Early 1800's." *TRANSACTIONS & STUDIES OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF PHILADELPHIA*, 4th Series, Vol., 43(4), April, 1976, 397-415 [Based on an invited address delivered at The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Philadelphia on October 22, 1975.]. **Read this paper in PDF format here.**

_____. "Phrenology and the Boston Medical Community in the 1830's." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 50:261-273, 1976. **Read this paper in PDF format here.**

_____. Johann Christoph Spurzheim and The Rise and Fall of Scientific Phrenology in Boston, 1832-1842. Abstracted in *DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS INTERNATIONAL: B, THE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING* 35 (3, September), 1974, pp. 1397B-1398B. 560 pages, Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104, 1974. [BF969.S6 W34]

_____. "The American Tour of Dr. Spurzheim." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 27:187-205, 1972. **Read this paper in PDF format here.**