

IS PHRENOLOGY FOOLISH? A REJOINDER

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As a psychologist acutely aware of the importance of Phrenology in the history of my field, and as a collector of Phrenological Memorabilia (I have a personal collection of more than 170 19th century and early 20th century Phrenological publications, in addition to a collection of busts, charts, *etc.*),¹ I found Dr. Bakan's article, "Is Phrenology Foolish?" in the May (1968) issue of *Psychology Today* to be an erudite and unique evaluation of the Phrenological movement in historical perspective, and a well illustrated and interesting presentation of information. The amount of evaluative literature that has been devoted to Phrenology during the past fifty years could easily be read in a few sittings. Rare is the psychology major who knows much about Phrenology and its historical importance. Most introductory texts, for example, devote little more than a paragraph or two to this most misunderstood discipline. Many discussions treat it calumniously and consider it to be little more than a "quaint notion" adhered to and followed by charlatans, *i.e.*, "bumpologists." There were, to be sure, many 19th century Peripatetic Phrenologists in this country—"Practical Phrenologists"—who did not have the approval of, nor the diploma from, Fowlers and Wells. These men were responsible for the charlatanry that Dr. Bakan speaks of (p. 47), and their behavior was certainly opprobrious and opportunistic. Gall, Spurzheim, the Combe brothers, the Fowler brothers, Wells, Sizer, *et. al.*, on the other hand, were honorable men. Their intentions were to advance Phrenology scientifically for the betterment of mankind. To contend that they *did not* provide a very real service for 19th century man would be absurd and would indicate an incomplete and narrow understanding of Phrenology's goals. It is unfortunate indeed that so many know so little about this integral part of Psychology's history.

While it is not my intention to animadvert at length upon Dr. Bakan's article, I feel that certain points made by Dr. Bakan need elucidation, while others, which are historically inaccurate, need correction.

Dr. Bakan states (p. 45) that Gall and Spurzheim together "... laid down and publicized the [sic] three broad hypotheses within which phrenology conducted itself." While this statement is essentially correct—Phrenology did operate within the three hypotheses Dr. Bakan mentions—, most Phrenological delineators list at least five hypotheses and sometimes more, *e.g.*, Fowler and Kirkham's *Phrenology* list the following:

- I. *The brain is the organ of the mind, or that corporeal instrument which the mind employs in the exercise of thought and feeling. . . .*
- II. *The mind consists of a plurality of innate and independent faculties—a congregate of separate, primary powers. . . .*
- III. *The brain consists of as many different portions or organs, as the mind does of faculties. . . .*

¹As of September, 1970, this collection numbers over 300 items.

- IV. *The various faculties of the mind are possessed, originally, in different degrees of strength by different individuals, and also by the same individual. . . .*
- V. *There exists a reciprocal proportion between the relative strength and power of the various mental faculties, and the size of those portions of the brain, or those organs, by which they are severally manifested. . . .*
- VI. *The shape of the brain may generally be ascertained by the form of the skull [sic]; . . .*
- VII. *The history of the discovery of phrenology, furnishes ample demonstration of its truth. . . .*
- VIII. *The truth of phrenology is mainly supported by an appeal to the demonstrative evidence of physical facts.*

(Fowler, *et. al.*, 1839, pp. 7 *et seqq.*)

Dr. Bakan states further (p. 45) that “. . . the phrenologists conceived of a human brain having some 37 independent powers or functions.” Agreement among Phrenologists vacillated often during the 19th century regarding the number of independent powers. Gall felt that there were 27 (Gall, 1835; cf., Capen, 1833, pp. 155 *et seq.*), while Spurzheim increased this to 35 (Capen, 1833, p. 157; cf., Spurzheim, 1833). Thirty-nine seems to be the most popular figure recorded; however, D. P. Butler proposed 88 faculties in 1856 and increased this to 92 by 1860 (Butler, 1856; & Butler, 1860). In *The Revised Twentieth-Century Phrenology*, Taylor suggested 42 faculties (Taylor, 1901). It is difficult to say that Phrenologists generally agreed on this point.

The cranioscopical aspect of Phrenology is perhaps most misunderstood. As early as 1836 it was understood that the relative length of the cortical fibers as they radiated from the *medulla oblongata* determined their level of functioning—the brain became larger as these fibers increased in length “. . . in like manner as a wagon-wheel is made large by the length of its spokes from the hub (Sizer, 1882, p. 385).” (Sewall, 1839; & Sizer, 1882, pp. 384 *et seqq.*) While the skull was believed to conform to the shape of the brain, the important measurements were the anthropometrical measurements of the skull in order to determine the length—and the concomitant level of functioning—of the fibers associated with each organ. The Phrenologist could ascertain, by means of a craniometer (see frontispiece in Sewall, 1839), certain proportions as they were related to the height of the cranium (as measured from the external auditory meatuses), the length of the cranium from the nasion to the inion, the width of the cranium, and so on. This method of measurement is a “far cry” from simply reading “bumps.”

Some of the statements by Dr. Bakan (p. 47) concerning Spurzheim's and Combe's visit to this country are inaccurate. I assume these are errata. Dr. Bakan states that “. . . Spurzheim arrived in Boston on August 24, 1832.” My research indicates that Spurzheim arrived in New York City on August 4, 1832, remained there until August 11th, proceeded to New Haven, then to Hartford on August 16th, and arrived in Boston on the evening of August 20, 1832 (Capen, 1881, pp. 8 *et seqq.*). He states further that “Some six frenzied weeks after his arrival Spurzheim died, mostly it would seem of exhaustion” Actually Spurzheim spent

a total of 82 days in Boston (11 weeks and 5 days), and died on Saturday, November 10, 1832 (the 82nd day) at around 11:00 P.M. (Capen, 1833, p. 133), of ". . . a continued fever, in which the nervous symptoms were predominant (Capen, 1833, p. 125)." His death certificate recorded in the city of Boston states that he died of fever.

Certain events subsequent to Spurzheim's death are interesting. Spurzheim's funeral was held on Saturday, November 17, 1832 at 2:00 P.M. at the Old South Church, Boston, Mass. Spurzheim's wish during his life that his skull be detached from his body upon his death and prepared for scientific purposes, this wish being conveyed to Nahum Capen by George Combe, was carried out under the direction of Dr. Winslow Lewis (Capen, 1881, p. 45). "The skull, brain, and heart were preserved, and placed in a fire-proof safe, and the remaining parts of the remains were deposited beneath the monument [in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass]. (Capen, 1881, p. 45.)" It is interesting to note that the official records of Mount Auburn Cemetery have no record of Spurzheim's interment although his monument is there. Spurzheim's brain and skull were preserved for many years in the Mastodon Room, No. 92 Chestnut Street, Boston, Mass. In time, however, the brain preparation spoiled and the brain no longer exists. I have been unable to obtain any information regarding the whereabouts of his heart; however, his skull, and other items from his personal collection, are in the possession of the Warren Anatomical Museum at Harvard Medical School.

In regard to the visit to this country by George Combe, Dr. Bakan states that "In September of 1832, George Combe . . . came to America." Combe actually arrived six years after that in September of 1838 (Boardman, 1846, p. xii). He began lecturing in Boston on the 10th of October, 1838; and, after delivering a total of 158 two hour lectures in this country, he departed for Europe on June 1, 1840 (Boardman, 1846, p. xii).

There are other aspects of Dr. Bakan's article with which I could take issue, *e.g.*, his deletion of a discussion of the Phrenological view regarding the temperaments—an integral aspect of their theory—; however, I believe that these criticisms would be beyond the scope of this article.

Since most resource books on the history of Psychology oftentimes contain many inaccuracies regarding Phrenology—many authors are disinclined to consult the primary sources in Phrenology—erroneous statements in popular articles are bound to become more prevalent if the authors of these articles rely solely on these secondary resources. While this may explain the appearance of certain errors in Dr. Bakan's article, it by no means condones generally the *modus operandi* wherein primary resource material is disregarded.²

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²In fairness to Dr. Bakan, the author feels obliged to note that *some* of the errors cited here, *e.g.*, those regarding Spurzheim's and Combe's visit to the United States, do not appear in Dr. Bakan's more scholarly article which appeared in this journal (Vol. II, No. 3, 200-220, July, 1966). The loss of accuracy as a result of the rewriting of a scholarly manuscript for presentation to the general public is a problem which should concern all who are involved and one which is deserving of a closer examination than the purposes of this writing will allow.

*All references are in the private collection of the author.

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