

PHRENOLOGY IN THE U.S.: A REAPPRAISAL*

Anthony A. Walsh, Ph.D.
Dickinson College

It is challenging to contemplate the development of a totally novel assessment of the contribution which the science of phrenology made to the advancement of our knowledge of human behavior, mental functioning, and neural processes. For phrenology, as a psychological, psychiatric, medical or generally scientific, social, reformatory, and messianic phenomenon of the 19th Century has had a great deal of evaluative literature devoted to it. During its lifetime and during the past seventy-five years, for example, historians and other specialists in a variety of fields sporadically emerged and took an interest in it. At least four doctoral dissertations have been written during the past five years or so devoted to special aspects of its history, as have an equal number of monographs and perhaps 50 articles in professional journals, and yet, no definitive history of its life-span covering all facets of its multi-faceted career has been prepared. Perhaps this is just as it should be, however, for phrenology's history, like that of the history of psychology itself, is too complex, global, and cross-disciplinary to be easily compartmentalized and put to rest—and it would probably be premature to do so. To a degree, of course, all histories are subject to this limitation insofar as Clio, reproach that she is, provides for us all in ever increasing degrees, sufficient illusions, changes, and new views of our past to make no historical writing ever definitive really and no event, discovery, or life subject to only one interpretation. “History is all things to all men,” Herbert Butterfield wrote on one occasion, for example, adding that “She is at the service of good and bad causes. In other words,” he continued, “she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most.” But despite the sexist

overtones in Butterfield's metaphor, his intentions were honorable. History after all, must be rewritten by each generation, and it can blind those most who suspect her least, but it is only through careful assessment and reassessment that we can truly understand her beguiling ways. By extension, of course, this is true of phrenology also, both as an isolated intellectual phenomenon moving in time and space from the late 1700's to the present day, and as a phenomenon—social and scientific in nature—permeating the lives of many people and the progress of a variety of disciplines psychology included.

The ultimate focus of this planned “exploration” of phrenology is to be concerned with its life in America with special reference to its introduction, influence, function, and status in the cumulative American enterprise involving our acquisition of an understanding of mental and neural processes and behavior. To the extent that phrenology was influential in mediating our transition from a primitive American psychology to our more modern one it will hold an important place in our history. To the extent that we can accept that fact that American psychology did not arise spontaneously --like the birth of Venus—from a sea of intellectual confusion when, for example, William James' laboratory was established in the 1870's, we will be more accepting of the reasonableness of the beliefs of our intellectual forbearers, beliefs in phrenology included; and, to the extent that we can become more cognizant of the extensive involvement of the 19th century medical community in the study of human behavior and mental processes, and to the extent that we can appreciate that there was a science of human behavior before James independent of the mental philosophies characteristic of the period, we will be better able to appreciate the fact that American psychology has a much richer history that we have heretofore been led to believe.

In 1929 in his *A History of Experimental Psychology* Boring observed, quote, “scientific psychology was born of phrenology out of wedlock with science.” This neatly turned, albeit tainted, phrase surely implies something other than what Boring probably meant, for it imputes a distinctly disreputable social position to psychology today. Responding to this comment by Boring, Dallenbach later noted that “The kind of science this makes psychology is certainly unacceptable in a reputable family.” Judiciously, Boring deleted the phrase in his revision of his work in 1950. But in 1974, continuing this form of vituperation and redirecting it, Hillix and Marx compounded Boring’s characterization of modern psychology in relation to phrenology in the family tree of the behavioral sciences. At that time they observed that it is “only fairly recently... [that] our sexual attitude [has] relaxed sufficiently so that we [now] recognize that [it was] that scientific bastard, phrenology, [which] was one... [of our] parents,” at least as far as functionalism is concerned. I am not quite sure what one would call scientific psychology today if we were to view it as the illegitimate child of an equally illegitimate parent. In any case, whether scientific psychology was born out of phrenology’s alleged simple dalliance with science or whether it as legitimately born elsewhere independently with phrenology being only one of scientific psychology’s dubious ancestors may be answered in part by this planned reassessment. Additionally, I believe that it may be demonstrated in this planned work that neither phrenology nor scientific psychology in either Boring’s or Hillix or Marx’s sense were illegitimate and that if scientific psychology did in fact grow out of any relationships phrenology had with science it was the result of a union which was at the time blessed and that despite the dubious features which in whiggish retrospect phrenology and its cohabitant scientific method present to

some people today they were of good basic stock and their offspring showed the benefits of their genetic interaction as it in turn interacted with an increasingly enriching intellectual environment. For, it can be demonstrated, for example, as Bakan, Dallenbach, and Hillix and Marx have pointed out, that American functionalism had its antecedents in phrenology especially in regard to the biological approach to behavior and the function of mind. Evolutionary doctrine itself too is historically linked to phrenological thought especially through such figures as Robert Chambers, Alfred Russell Wallace, and Herbert Spencer to name a few. Positivist thought too may be traced through Comte and Gall. To the extent that we can accept the Hillix and Marx additional contention that functionalism has not disappeared from the contemporary scene at all but has simply “swallowed [up] the rest of psychology” we will need to develop a clearer picture of and an appreciation for the climate of opinion--both scientific and social--which mediated this somewhat uniquely American orientation to our field.

Phrenology in its scientific aspects--as distinguished from its popularized form--may be shown furthermore to have permeated other areas of our American behavioral science culture and scientific heritage. To the extent the psychology's development can be said to have been mediated by developments in medicine, psychiatry, penology, anthropology, education, ethnology, and the scientific and social study of the child special attention will need to be paid to phrenology's contributions to these areas in the early years of modern psychology's individuation. For it can be shown that phrenology helped to shape and elicit advances in all of these disciplines--particularly in this country. And to the extent that we can remember that experimental psychology, or developmental psychology, or clinical psychology or cognitive psychology are merely branches of the

larger field of general psychology which is in itself merely one of the many behavioral science disciplines we will not demand from phrenology or from any other isolated aspect of our collective and rich heritage that they demonstrate their relevance to psychology narrowly conceived before being admitted into favor. That is, to the extent that we can approximate the Renaissance Man attitudinally we will not discard phrenology or any other such school of thought, person, or event in our past for not making a direct contribution to this or that narrow branch in our field. Phrenology made many contributions to the behavioral sciences broadly conceived and it is to be these contributions to this broad area of inquiry of which psychology is a part which will need to be explored in this investigation.

In closing, and with special reference to some of my earlier remarks, I would like to say that we should remember that it is quite easy for scientists today to firmly believe that they are guided in their work by methods which are the veritable quintessence of exactitude. But we should also be aware of the fact that scientific phrenologists of the early 19th Century felt just the same way about their methods. For, while we may think that we are guided today by a near perfect paradigm we should, as we would in predicting the New England weather, “wait a minute”--it may change! Furthermore, I believe that when all the evidence is in in the trial wherein the defendant phrenology is accused by modern scientific psychology of having been unscientific and a pseudoscience in all facets of its career, our verdict will be what is sometimes termed a “Scotch Decision,” that is, “Not guilty! But don’t do it again.”

References:

D. Bakan, "The influence of phrenology on American psychology," J. hist. behav. Sci., 1966, 2:200-220.

E. G. Boring, A history of experimental psychology (New York: Appleton, 1929), p. 55.

E. G. Boring, A history of experimental psychology (New York: Appleton, 1950), p. 58.

H. Butterfield, The whig interpretation of history (New York: Norton, 1965) p. 131.

K. M. Dallenbach, "Phrenology versus psychoanalysis." Amer. J. Psychol., 1955, 68:511-525 [513].

K. M. Dallenbach, "The history and derivation of the word 'function' as a systematic term in psychology." Amer. J. Psychol., 1915, 26:473-484.

W. A. Hillix and M. H. Marx, Systems and Theories of Psychology: A reader (New York: West, 1974) p. 141.

*Paper read on 1 September 1975 at the 83rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, Illinois as part of a SYMPOSIUM entitled "Explorations in the History of American Psychology." This symposium was a "working symposium" bringing together the participants who are to contribute separate chapters to a book by the same title due out in 1979 (Bucknell University Press). The presentation is necessarily brief and refers to planned, rather than completed, work. Much of the symposium time was devoted to discussion and intellectual interaction.

[Note: This writer's career was disrupted subsequent to this proposal and for whatever reason he did not write this chapter after all. The book was published finally in 1984 under the editorship of Josef Brozek as Explorations in the history of psychology in the United States (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press). aaw October 11, 2007].