

STEPHEN TOMLINSON



Head Masters

Phrenology, Secular
Education, and
Nineteenth-Century
Social Thought

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STEPHEN TOMLINSON

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Frontal Matter

Do you understand Phrenology? The principles of Phrenology lie at the bottom of all sound mental philosophy, and of all the sciences depending upon the science of Mind; and of all sound theology, too. Combe's "Constitution of Man" is the greatest book that has been written for centuries. It shows us those conditions of our being without whose observance we cannot be wise, useful, or happy. It demonstrates from our very organization, and from our relation to the universe in which we are placed, that we cannot be prosperous (in any true sense of that word) unless we are intelligent, and cannot be happy unless we are good. It "vindicates the way of God to man" better than any polemical treatise I have ever read.

—Horace Mann, "Letter to a Young Lawyer,"
July 23, 1852. Published in *Dansville Herald*
and *American Phrenological Journal*

Horace Mann died in August 1859, just two months prior to the birth of John Dewey. This was also the same year, of course, in which Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*. Therefore, not only did Mann and Dewey live during different times, their thoughts took shape in eras governed by radically different cosmologies. Both believed that the central problem of life was adaptation, but where Dewey, writing in the wake of the theory of evolution and the upheavals of modern urban-industrial life, rejected all moral and physical absolutes, Mann held an unquestioning faith in a divinely ordered and beneficent world. The Earth, Mann claimed, "is our automation." "Like Adam in a garden of Eden . . . man is born into a universe . . . redolent in treasures for the body, in grandeur for the mind, and in happiness for the heart."¹ "He finds . . . a vast and perfect apparatus of means adapted and designed to minister to his enjoyment and to aggrandize his power. The globe with all its dynamical energies, its mineral treasures, its vegetative powers, its fecundities of life, is

only a grand and divinely wrought machine put into his hands; and on the condition of knowledge, he may wield it and use it as an artisan uses his tool.”² Most importantly, Mann maintained, God had crafted the world according to the principle of virtue: actions that were good would be rewarded with pleasure; those that were bad would be punished with pain. The key to human happiness, therefore, was to understand and follow the moral imperatives woven into the laws of nature. Thus where Dewey pictured meaning and value as products of an open-ended transaction, Mann defended the “subjection or conformity of all our appetites, propensities and sentiments to the will of Heaven,” God’s providential economy of nature.³

In the months prior to his appointment as Secretary of Education to the State of Massachusetts, Mann found in George Combe’s *Constitution of Man* a practical guide to life under this philosophical system.⁴ Combe, the leading phrenologist of the day, demonstrated how the physiological laws of heredity and experience governing the structure and development of the brain could be employed to adapt human behavior to the moral laws of nature. From the choice of a spouse to the eradication of alcoholism, from the treatment of the insane to the reformation of the criminal, he brought every function of the modern world under the management of his mental science. Above all, with the aid of James Simpson, Combe worked tirelessly to establish a system of education grounded in the principles of phrenology—a cause that made him Britain’s leading advocate of public secular schooling and a scientific curriculum based on Pestalozzian child-centered teaching methods.⁵

Sending a copy of the *Constitution* and a phrenological head to his sister, Mann confessed,

I know of no book written for hundreds of years which does so much to vindicate the ways of God to man. *Its philosophy is the only practical basis for education.* These doctrines will work the same change in metaphysical science that Lord Bacon wrought in natural.⁶

And, indeed, the *Constitution*, together with Simpson’s *Philosophy of Education*, did become the basis for the reforms Mann championed in his common school crusade.⁷ His arguments against the classics and corporal punishment, his advocacy of the object lesson and the teaching of physi-

ology, his efforts to establish a nonsectarian school library and state Normal schools, and his insistence that moral education was the central task of public education were all prefigured in the writings of the British phrenologists.⁸ When, in 1838, Combe traveled to the United States to promote his gospel of progress in the New World, the two men quickly established a close personal bond that matured into a lifelong friendship each would draw upon to further their respective reform efforts in Britain and America.⁹ Mann even named his second son for “the philosopher.”

According to Harold Silver, Combe and Simpson, “important figures in controversies and campaigns of the middle decades of the nineteenth century,” have been repeatedly overlooked by British historians: a neglect, he claims, that has “resulted in profound distortions of the history of education, of social and cultural realities.”¹⁰ Similarly, although Lawrence Cremin has recognized that “the influence of phrenology on Mann’s thought is universally apparent” neither he nor any other historian of American education has explained the meaning that this science had for reformers of the Early Republic.¹¹ Even Jonathan Messerli’s magisterial biography, although acknowledging Mann’s commitment to phrenology, fails to explain how he wielded physiological laws in his many reform efforts and is silent about the phrenologically based racism, sexism, and classism that permeated all of his writings. Michael Katz’s *Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) only mentions phrenology in passing, whereas David Hogan confuses “affectionate authority” with moral treatment in a Lockian account of mind that Mann specifically rejects.¹² Indeed, the very idea that the founding father of the American common school was a committed phrenologist appears to be something of an embarrassment to historians who remember phrenology the way Mark Twain pictured it, as a pseudoscientific fad in which hucksters read character traits from the bumps on a person’s skull. But this unfortunate and distorted perception is more a product of historiography than of historical fact. For although it is true that by the 1860s it had been largely relegated to fairgrounds and seaside piers, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, phrenology was a widely accepted theory of human nature, embraced by prominent scientists and intellectuals—including leading members of the medical community who saw in its laws of heredity and exercise an explanation for insanity and the practice of moral treatment developed by Philippe Pinel and Samuel Tuke.¹³ Having worked to establish America’s

first public asylum at Worcester, Mann was thoroughly conversant with the psychiatric theory of the 1820s. Indeed, as his second wife, Mary Peabody Mann, explains, “His interest and action in the cause of insane hospitals had deepened his insight into the primary causes and hindrances of human development: and the study of ‘Combe’s Constitution of Man,’ which he met with in 1837, added new fuel to the fire of his enthusiasm.”¹⁴ By demonstrating how the principles of psychological management perfected on the insane could be extended to the entire community, the *Constitution* provided Mann with the pedagogic techniques necessary to engineer his vision of a virtuous republic supervised by God’s laws. His many reform efforts can only be understood through the lens of this synthesis. As Combe himself boasted, phrenology’s “influence in supplying him with guiding principles is conspicuous in every work that proceeds from his pen.”¹⁵

PHRENOLOGICAL THEORY

George Henry Lewes observed in 1857 that although “phrenology is of German origin . . . it was in France that it acquired its European éclat,” evolving from a physiological theory of brain functions into a middle-class social philosophy that—unable to flourish in the conservative atmosphere cast by the Restoration government—was quickly embraced by the more liberal thinkers of the new urban-industrial English-speaking world.¹⁶ In many respects, phrenology was the heir of *Idéologie*, the medically based social science of the Revolution’s bourgeois theorists. First formulated by Franz-Joseph Gall as a physiological theory of brain structure in which character and abilities could be determined from the size of mental organs (revealed by the contours of the cranium), it was effectively transformed into a progressive moral philosophy by Johan Gasper Spurzheim, who normalized the mind around middle-class values by defining human nature in terms of the balanced operation of faculties such as time, order, conscientiousness, adhesiveness, and love of approbation. Further elaborated and popularized by George Combe—in opposition to the environmental and socialist doctrines of Owenism—it flourished in Britain as a philosophy of practical Christianity and self-help that broadly endorsed a Whig program of political reforms aimed at improving the mind and habits of the working classes. It was Spurzheim’s and Combe’s powerful message of

personal and racial improvement toward the religious ideal of physiological perfection that guided Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe, his coworker in reform, in their remarkable efforts to institutionalize the early American Republic. The Normal school; the asylum; the prison; the reformatory; schools for the deaf, the blind, and the feeble-minded; and the formation of the Freedmen's Bureau and the American welfare system were influenced by phrenology.

In recent years, phrenology has captured the interest of cultural historians who, following the insights of Foucault and other social theorists, have attempted to use this apparently implausible hypothesis as a lens by which to chart the epistemic contours of the nineteenth-century mind. This "external" history is certainly vital to an understanding of the role phrenology played as a focus of middle-class interests at a time of enormous social change. But there is also an important "internal" story to be told. How did phrenology unite physiological laws and moral imperatives? How was it tied to the natural theology of secularism? And how were its basic principles of human classification, inheritance, and development used to underwrite progressive pedagogic and disciplinary practices? This work attempts to answer these and similar questions by looking at phrenological theory from the inside—from the perspective of its leading advocates. Extending epistemological debates, it investigates the practical: what phrenology meant to Gall, Spurzheim, Combe, Mann, and Howe, and how these "Head Masters" wielded its doctrines in their many and various efforts to reform schooling and other institutional practices.

Anyone familiar with the history of British and American education will no doubt regard the claim that phrenology played such an important role in the development of schooling and other institutional practices with some skepticism. This book will challenge that orthodoxy. It will introduce new figures into the historical account, paint a different portrait of leading reformers, and attempt to make the implausible, phrenology, seem plausible. It will expose the way class, race, and gender stereotypes permeated nineteenth-century thought and show how views of nature, mind, and society supported a secular curriculum coupled with physiologically based disciplinary practices. It is hoped that this will lead to a new appreciation for the ideas and theories that motivated reformers such as Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe and, equally important, a reassessment of George Combe, who, although hardly known by contemporary schol-

ars, emerges as one of the most important and influential educators of the century.

Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought is a long book, with many meanders. It explores social and educational thought in three countries, sometimes attending to the big picture, sometimes focusing on details. Although there is an internal logic to this progression, the following claims may help keep the larger argument in mind.

- Any philosophy of education must incorporate some view of human nature and a conception of the social good. For Mann, Howe, and other followers of George Combe, the natural laws and moral imperatives of phrenology justified a secular scientific curriculum and a “softer” child-centered pedagogy as the means of correctly training a rational and virtuous citizenry.
- Phrenology came to prominence as the successor of Ideology, the positivistic social science developed by the liberal political theorists of the French Revolution. Drawing from the philosophical radicalism of Helvétius and the Lockian epistemology of Condillac, the *Idéologues* sought to restructure French society around principles derived from their physiologically based “science of man.” Conceiving education as the process of perfecting human nature, they designed legislation, public festivals, and a hierarchical system of schooling to engineer a moral republic grounded in social and economic laws. Although these ideas were brought to Virginia by Thomas Jefferson, Ideology did not take root in America. It was only after the rise of practical phrenology in Britain, and its subsequent importation to the United States in the 1830s, that reformers embraced psychological management of the population.
- As in France, British phrenologists extended the economic and political agenda of middle-class theorists, the associationist psychology and utilitarian philosophy of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham—early advocates of monitorial education for the working poor. Inspired by the disciplinary practices devised by Robert Owen, George Combe and James Simpson rescripted Pestalozzian pedagogy around phrenological laws and, during the 1830s, spearheaded the Radical movement for a state system of secular schooling: the com-

petitive pedagogy and mechanical lessons of the Lancasterian system were replaced by the intrinsic interest of the child, the appeal to reason, and the religious imperative to follow God's will as manifested in scientific laws. A decade later Combe combined with Mill's protégé William Ellis to establish model secular schools that would demonstrate how the principles of political economy and physiology could be taught to the working classes. Finally, it was Combe's popularization of Mann's work in Massachusetts that solved the religious problem and provided the blueprint for the 1870 and 1872 Education Acts of England and Scotland.

- Although nowhere recognized in histories of education, it was Combe's practical physiology that Mann and Howe drew upon to shape the institutions that shaped America. These principles funded a classist, racist, and sexist political agenda. Convinced that the laws of exercise and heredity could be used to eliminate the degenerate and develop a more perfect Christian character, Howe and Mann embraced the eugenic doctrines of phrenology in the search for a superior New England bloodline. Phrenology provided the moral technology necessary for the control—and ultimate elimination—of the abnormal: the mad, the deaf, the blind, the mentally retarded, the deviant, the criminal, and the mulatto.

This transatlantic story is told in three parts. Starting in France, the epistemological and pedagogic program of the *Idéologues* is explored through the writings of Condillac, Cabanis, and Destutt de Tracy, and then traced to America in the educational schemes of Thomas Jefferson. The second section explains how Spurzheim normalized Gall's neurological theory into a middle-class moral philosophy. Promoted in Britain by Combe as an alternative to the radical environmentalism and utopian socialism of Robert Owen, phrenology was then used to justify improving the mind and morals of the working classes through infant education and public schooling—albeit, within a hierarchically ordered and scientifically managed middle-class meritocracy. Finally, the third section of the book details Spurzheim and Combe's visits to America and reveals the ways in which Howe and Mann utilized phrenology to justify their sweeping social reforms.

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I

“The Science of Man”

The memoirs published at the beginning of this century by Cabanis on the connection between the physical and moral nature, are the first great and direct effort to bring within the domain of positive philosophy this study previously abandoned entirely to the theological and metaphysical methods. The impulse imparted to the human mind by these memorable investigations has not fallen off. The labours of Dr. Gall and his school have singularly strengthened it, and, especially, have impressed on this new and final portion of physiology a high degree of precision by supplying a definite base of discussion and investigation.

Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, 1875

Postrevolutionary France, Frank Manuel claims, was the site of “one of the crucial developments in modern intellectual history . . . the reversal from the eighteenth century view of man as more or less equal . . . to the early nineteenth century emphasis upon human uniqueness, diversity, and dissimilarity” that culminated “in theories of inequality and organicism.”¹ This transformation, from the egalitarian sensationalism and laissez-faire liberalism of the philosophes to the more interventionist social behaviorism of the positive sociologists Claude Henri Saint-Simon and August Comte, comprised at least three distinct assumptions: Metaphysical speculation had to be replaced by an anthropological “science of man” that explained the mind through the vital property of sensibility; the population was divisible into distinct physiological types according to factors such as sex, age, temperament, and inherited capacities; and medical and pedagogic practices could be devised to perfect more rational, moral, and industrious citizens. Like the differentiation and integration of parts with a living organism, this vision of human nature and the social good suggested that a well-ordered state had to utilize biological difference and coordinate a sense of solidarity. Equality and freedom were no longer seen as conditions for society, but as ideals toward

which the individual and the social organization must progress. Although Manuel does not mention the work of Gall or Spurzheim, Comte's own phrenologically grounded writings clearly indicate the important role neurological accounts human diversity played in this intellectual evolution. By 1828, when the first phrenological society opened in Paris, Gall's new science had become a practical moral philosophy, offering a physiologically based system of classification and powerful disciplinary practices to normalize the population—the immature, the deviant, and the degenerate—in line with liberal bourgeois values.

The pivotal figure in the rise of physiology in French social thought was Pierre Cabanis, one of a loose and often contentious group of liberal intellectuals, popularly known as the *Idéologues*, who came to power as the Directory (1795-99) struggled to reestablish public institutions and secure stability in the years after the Terror.² From their seat in the Second Class on Moral and Political Sciences at the newly founded National Institute they sought to justify secular social policies that would help realize the rational and moral principles of the enlightenment. Civic laws, penal codes, welfare, health services, and especially education, they believed, had to be purged of the doctrinal dictates of the church and restructured in accordance with the natural laws governing the human mind.

A member of the Auteuil salon of Mme Helvétius, Cabanis was well acquainted with the materialist philosophers d'Holbach, Diderot, and La Mettrie, and had even met Condillac, the theorist from whom the *Idéologues* drew their central concepts of analysis and sensation. In a series of twelve reports, he fused Condillac's radical empiricism with advances in medical science to explain the relationship between the physical and the moral in human nature.³ Men and women were situated within the animal kingdom, organic phenomena were reduced to the universal principle of sensitivity, and the transmutation of species were explained through environmentally induced inherited changes. Most importantly, Cabanis's materialism eschewed all metaphysical categories. The distinctively moral qualities, traditionally associated with the cogito or immortal soul, had to be understood as properties of a living organization. The production of thought by the brain, he famously argued, could even be compared to the secretion of bile by the liver. No longer the domain of the theologian and the metaphysician, the mind was now open to scientific study and medical control.

Following Helvétius, the *Idéologues* understood that the purpose of govern-

ment was education: the Republic existed to improve the physical, moral, and intellectual character of the population. Although rejecting Helvétius’s extreme environmentalism, Cabanis and his coworker in reform, Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, were convinced that rationally and physiologically informed legislation could elevate the mind and the morals of all citizens. This demanded a scientifically educated cadre of civil servants who understood how to regulate thought and desire through education and other social institutions—much as a doctor might balance bodily health through diet, exercise, and climate. Tracy spearheaded this drive to create a *classe savante* through the scientific curriculum of the elite central schools established by the *Idéologues* in 1795. Pedagogy was also of paramount concern. Here Cabanis and his followers looked to the disciplinary techniques of Philippe Pinel, whose pioneering work with the insane demonstrated the power of therapeutic practices to restore alienated minds to reason—a psychological method, it was recognized, whose practices could easily be applied to the education of children. Roch-Ambroise Sicard, who drew upon Condillac’s epistemology to construct a language of gestures for the deaf, also generalized his instructional strategies for future teachers at the *Ecole Normale*, which opened earlier the same year. Accordingly, when in 1800, Jean-Marc Itard attempted to apply these techniques to the education of Victor, the Savage of Aveyron, the *Idéologues* expected spectacular proof of their theory of mind and the power of moral treatment to transform society. As it turned out, Itard taught the world a great deal about pedagogy, but the mixed results he achieved with Victor only served to fuel growing skepticism about the plasticity of human abilities and the optimistic claims of social scientists.

Although supporters of the coup d’état that established the Consulate, the *Idéologues* were quickly marginalized as Bonaparte consolidated power. Distanting himself from their efforts to analyze the mind, their strident anticlericalism, and their liberal policies, he embraced Catholic sympathies and in so doing helped to create the climate for a conservative reaction to the Revolution. The chaos of the Jacobin Terror was easily blamed upon sensationalism and its godless offspring Ideology. By reducing the mind to habits formed in response to pleasure and pain, faith in free will and the immortal soul had been undercut and the institutions that ensured social order displaced. Conservatives saw in Bonaparte the promise of stability; Bonaparte recognized in the church what his burgeoning bureaucratic state most

needed: an instrument of public control. Alert to the threat that this pact posed to their liberal reforms, several leading *Idéologues* participated in fruitless efforts to overthrow the emperor's regime, the result of which was the suppression of the Institute's Second Class and the replacement of the central schools with lycées that restored traditional studies over the secular curriculum advocated by Tracy.

This reemergence of religiosity was not simply the result of political maneuvering. As the writings of Ideology's most prominent students demonstrate, the force of spiritual experience could not be denied. Pinel, for instance, sought to reconcile the "science of man" with the reality of the *cogito*. Joseph-Marie de Gérando—future statesman, social philanthropist, promoter of Lancasterian schooling, and early influence on the New England Transcendentalists—also rejected Condillac's vision of the faculties as transformed sensations. Turning to Kant, with Maine de Brian, and later Rolland-Collier and Victor Cousin, he helped justify the introspective analysis of thought central to the eclectic philosophy of the Late Empire and Restoration. Particularly influential was Pierre Laromiguière's assertion that attention was an active and independent power of the mind. This argument was embraced by Pinel's successor, Dominique Esquirol, and through his teachings, Edward Séguin, the so-called "apostle of the "idiots, who adapted Itard's methods to the training of the mentally retarded.

The phrenologists also attempted to preserve many of the scientific, social, and educational goals of Ideology, while offering a theory of mind compatible with religious sensibilities and—through their commitment to innate biological differences in intellect and character—the growing political acceptance of social hierarchies. Although framed in opposition to the basic tenets of Condillac's empiricism, Gall and Spurzheim's insistence that all mental functions have a somatic base in the structures of the brain appealed to medical theorists sympathetic to Cabanis's project. For spiritualists and emperor, however, this was old wine in new bottles. Phrenology was the child of sensationalism, yet another materialistic doctrine that undermined freedom, responsibility, and the religious foundation of community life.

SENSATIONALISM

Condillac composed his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746) in order to render empiricism fully consistent with the scientific method.⁴ Locke, he explained, had studied the understanding by observing how all