



## **Phrenology and the Fowlers**

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The term phrenology is derived from the Greek phrenos, meaning “discourse on the mind” and represents a pseudoscience. Phrenology essentially postulates that the skull’s shape is an observable concurrence of the brain, individual intellect, and personality traits. One had only to examine the scalp to ascertain an individual’s character and talents as well as morality.

Phrenology became a popular 19th century concept for the link between the mind and the brain, first conjectured by 19th century Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall from his empirical patient observations. He termed phrenology “science of the mind”, linking his observations as a correlation between character and the mind. Phrenology eventually appeared in America in 1832 with the arrival of Dr. Gall’s understudy Dr. Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. Within only a short time, the Fowler family popularized and commercialized phrenology for the American public.

### **Early Neuroscience and the Mind**

When we conjure up the concept of mind it brings forth such behavioral manifestations as perception, memory, sensation, feelings and

reason, as well as other numerous thought processes associated with functions of the central nervous system. This was not the case prior to the late 19th century when much of human behavior was attributed to spiritual and demonic origins. One of the earliest attempts to link the brain to behavior was by the 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes' "mind (soul) body dualism" theory. Descartes postulated that the mind (soul) and the body were separate with the mind being a non-physical entity. He attributed the mind with consciousness and the brain with intelligence. The two interacted at the pineal gland (epiphysis cerebri) where sensory impulses were supposedly transferred through animal spirits (cerebrospinal fluid) to the mind.

It wasn't until the early 19th century that German physician Franz Joseph Gall conceptualized a more elaborate theory of the relationship between the mind and body. Dr. Gall put forth his notion that there was a strong correlation between character and skull shape. Using beer and wine to encourage patients to disclose personality traits, he would take measurements of their scalp. After numerous empirical observations, he concluded the brain was the origin of the mind. An individual's character traits were like a muscle that could be strengthened from birth and developed over time into personality traits. These "brain muscles" exerted pressure on the cranium wall during developmental maturity and were alleged to be observable on an examination of the scalp. The European medical establishment did not accept Gall's mind-brain theory at the time. Following Gall's death, his understudy Dr. Johann G. Spurzheim migrated to America in 1832, but not before phrenology became popular in Scotland where the Edinburgh Phrenological Society was established. During the 1830s Spurzheim captivated Americans on the East coast with his inspiring phrenology lectures. His enthusiasm captivated listener's thirst for this philosophy of the mind. Subsequently, numerous phrenological societies sprang up in the East following his campaign efforts with the largest in Philadelphia, Boston and New York City. What is most remarkable at the time was his speculation that the brain's function was proposed to be regionalized in various locations, a theory termed "localization of function" that was somewhat validated using ablation

studies on animals by early neuroscientists. However, these later studies were related to basic sensory and motor functions and not the 27 different regions of the scalp that Spurzheim proposed were associated with character traits. He became so popular in America that, following his death in 1832, his brain was preserved in alcohol at the Harvard School of Medicine. During the 19th century, phrenology became so popular in Europe and the United States that phrenology periodicals and books were published by the thousands, along with pronouncements by many leading figures including Horace Mann, Horace Greeley of the Tribune and Henry Ward Beecher to name a few. Plaster and cracked porcelain phrenology busts were also popular items for marketing by the Fowlers to practitioners and can still be found occasionally in some museums today.

## **The Fowlers**

Henry Beecher's undergraduate classmate at Amherst, Orson Squire Fowler, would pick up Spurzheim's baton to conduct an extensive, life-long, phrenology campaign throughout America and Europe. Orson S Fowler (1809) grew up on a wooded farm in upstate New York. His mother Martha gave birth to brother Lorenzo N Fowler and sister Charlotte two and four years later. Their father Deacon H Fowler had cleared a lot for a log house in the wooded wilderness of Cohocton, New York that was solely occupied by Indians at that time. He demanded a strict attendance to farm chores from his children while encouraging the boys to become ministers. Orson would go on to study for the clergy for a short time under the tutelage of the reverend Moses Miller of the First Congregational Church in Heath, Massachusetts while the Reverend was also a member of Amherst College. Amherst was where Orson met Henry W Beecher who encouraged him to major in Mental Philosophy. While at Amherst, he would conduct examinations of his fellow classmates making phrenological deductions of their character. His brother Lorenzo followed in his footsteps and shared his passion for the new pseudoscience. Even Orson's sister Charlotte came to share her brothers' enthusiasm for phrenology due to her interests in women's rights and association with the Ladies Magazine and

Literary Gazette in Boston. Charlotte would go on to instruct others on the tenets of phrenology at Ludlowville, New York.

Following his, and his brothers, graduation from Amherst in 1834, Orson's professional career took off with the families lecture circuit. The Fowlers developed a phrenology chart for their handbills that became an overnight sensation. At the conclusion of their free medicine show lectures they always provided live demonstrations of audience temperaments along with a personal chart. The Fowlers would also employ physiognomy with their phrenological assessments by reading the facial lines and contours of their participants. Following an examination of the skull, they would measure the horizontal circumference of the head and document bony occipital, temporal and frontal bony protrusions. From all these assessments, a detailed report would be provided of temperament and character. This detailed report included such traits as combativeness, destructiveness, ideality, and acquisitiveness from the 27 mental and moral faculties on their chart. (Ed.note – other faculties were later added...see additional references)

As the Fowler's lecture circuit gradually expanded, so did their marketing and business ventures with associates Samuel R Wells and Nelson Sizer. Together, Wells and Sizer were in-charge of the Fowler's phrenological businesses and publishing house Fowler & Wells in New York City. A second phrenological publishing house, L. N. Fowler & Co., was set up in England by Lorenzo, where he spent most of his time. London witnessed more than twenty-eight phrenological societies by the 1840s. What really propelled the popularity of phrenology were the personal endorsements by many celebrated and influential participants such as Clara Barton, Edwin Forrest, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Hiram Powers, James V. Stout as well as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The Fowler's phrenology practice was also endorsed by George Combe, founder of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society in 1820. Combe aided the growth of Fowler's Philadelphia office where he gave lectures for Orson.

During the 1940s, the Fowlers closed their Philadelphia office and moved the Phrenological Society to a much larger facility in New York

City's Clinton Hall, on the corners of Beekman and Nassau. It was during the 40s that the Fowlers initiated an expansion of the phrenology tenets, known as reformation or self-help, which were dedicated to empowering people to manage their own behavior. Many of the American Phrenological Journal articles were devoted to encouraging "free will" to change and improve memory using mnemonics and mesmerism. An individual could be his own phrenologist by enlarging or diminishing his brain's organ and consequently encouraging or discouraging one's faults, excesses and habits through memory training. The Fowlers firmly believed that their phrenology could reform the world if more individuals practiced "mental self-discipline" and followed the formulations laid out in their Self-Proved Dictionary Table. Their published manuals entitled *Fowler on Memory and Phrenology Applied to the Cultivation of Memory* championed the theory that one could change their memory by reading more and speed reading as well as acquiring a foreign language. These reform moments were especially relevant to reforming young minds where phrenology should be brought into the schools as endorsed by Horace Mann. The Fowlers went even further with this pronouncement advocating its use for rehabilitating children's mental health disabilities as well as adult neurological disabilities such as epilepsy.

## **Conclusion**

The late 19th century witnessed a disillusionment with the basic tenets of phrenology, due primarily to many new discoveries in the neuroscience community and medicine. But a large part of the disenchantment was brought on by the gender stereotyping actions of Orson himself. Towards the last quarter of the 19th century, Orson was plagued by financial concerns due to numerous legal battles from the press regarding his licentious publications concerning the female nature. The stress from these unfavorable allegations and public opinion may have taken its toll on his health. In 1887, at Sharon Station, New York, he passed. His brother Lorenzo would succumb to his second stroke in 1896 while sister Charlotte would survive until 1901. What remained of their diminished business and publishing empire was passed on to Jessie

Fowler until phrenology's final **desecration** by modern science. As a pseudo-medical fad, phrenology eventually fell out of scientific respect by the onset of the 20th century. However, phrenology was a source of inspiration for 20th century neuroscientists as to the basic localization of some brain functions. Among antiquarians, the fowler's publications are still in great demand as well as their phrenological busts that are sought after by antique dealers as conversation pieces.

### **Main Reference**

*Stern, M.B. Heads & Headlines, 1971, Univ Oklahoma Press, Norman*  
(Author's Note: This is the authoritative text on Phrenology)

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### **Additional Reference 1**

<https://www.yorku.ca/rsheese2/1010/gall.htm>

The 27 faculties of Franz Joseph Gall

Gall suggested that the brain was divided into 27 separate "organs". Each organ supposedly corresponded to a discrete human faculty, though Gall identified 19 of these faculties as being shared with other animal species. The first nineteen in the list below are organs allegedly common to men and animals; the final eight are specific to humans.

1. The instinct of reproduction (impulse to propagation)
2. The love of one's offspring (parental love)
3. Affection; friendship (fidelity)
4. The instinct of self-defence; courage; the tendency to get into fights.
5. The carnivorous instinct; the tendency to murder
6. Guile; acuteness; cleverness (sense of cunning)
7. The feeling of property; the instinct of stocking up on food (in animals); covetousness; the tendency to steal (larceny)
8. Pride; arrogance; haughtiness; love of authority; loftiness
9. Vanity; ambition; love of glory
10. Circumspection; forethought
11. The memory of things; the memory of facts; aptness to receive an education; perfectibility
12. The sense of places (locality); of space proportions
13. The memory of people; the sense of people

14. The memory of words
15. The sense of language; of speech
16. The sense of colours (delighting in colours)
17. The sense of sounds; the gift of music
18. The sense of connectness between numbers (arithmetic, time)
19. The sense of mechanics, of construction; the talent for architecture.
20. Comparative perspicuity, sagacity
21. The sense of metaphysics
22. The sense of satire; the sense of witticism, sense of inference
23. The poetical talent
24. Kindness; benevolence; gentleness; compassion; sensitivity; moral sense
25. The faculty to imitate; the mimic
26. The organ of religion (sense of God)
27. The firmness of purpose; constancy; perseverance; obstinacy.

From: <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/phrenology/organs.html#gall> (no longer active)  
and <http://www.phrenology.com/franzjosephgall.html>

### ***Additional Reference 2***

<https://www.cerebromente.org.br/n01/frenolog/frenmap.htm>

### ***Additional Reference 3***

## **The Organs of Mental and Moral Faculties According to Phrenology**

<https://www.cerebromente.org.br/n01/frenolog/frenorg.htm>

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <b>Amativeness</b>                                  | Physical Love   |
| 2 | <b>Philoprogenitiveness</b><br><b>Parental Love</b> | A particular feeling which watches over and provides for helpless offspring, or parental love |
| 3 | <b>Adhesiveness</b><br><b>Friendship</b>            | A feeling or attraction to become friendly with other persons, or to increase social contacts |
| 4 | <b>Combativeness</b>                                | The disposition to quarrel and fight  |
| 5 | <b>Destructiveness</b>                              | The propensity to destroy   |

6	<b>Secretiveness</b>	The propensity to conceal, predisposes the individual to Cunning and Slyness
7	<b>Acquisitiveness</b>	The propensity to acquire
8	<b>Self-Esteem</b>	This sentiment gives us a great opinion of ourselves, constituting self-love
9	<b>Approbateness</b>	This faculty seeks the approbation of others. It makes us attentive to the opinion entertained by others of ourselves
10	<b>Cautiousness</b>	This organ incites us to take precautions
11	<b>Individuality</b>	This faculty contributes to the recognition of the existence of individual beings, and facilitates the embodiment of several elements into one
12	<b>Locality</b>	This faculty conceives of places occupied by the objects that surround us
13	<b>Form</b>	This allows us to understand the shapes of objects
14	<b>Verbal memory</b>	The memory for words.
15	<b>Language</b>	Philology in General
16	<b>Coloring</b>	This organ cognizes, recollects, and judges the relations of colors
17	<b>Tune</b>	The organ of musical perception
18	<b>Calculativeness Number</b>	The organ responsible for the ability to calculate and to handle numbers and figures
19	<b>Constructiveness</b>	The faculty leading to the will of constructing something
20	<b>Comparison</b>	This faculty compares the sensations and notions excited by all other faculties, points out their similitudes, analogies, differences or identity, and comprehends their relations, harmony or discord
21	<b>Causality</b>	This faculty allows us to understand reason behind events
22	<b>Vitiveness Wit</b>	This faculty predisposes men to view every thing in a joyful way
23	<b>Ideality</b>	This faculty vivifies the other faculties and impresses a peculiar character called ideal
24	<b>Benevolence</b>	This power produces mildness and goodness, compassion, and kindness, humanity
25	<b>Imitiveness</b>	This organ produces a fondness for acting and for dramatic representation
26	<b>Generation</b>	This faculty allows us to come up with new ideas
27	<b>Firmness</b>	This faculty gives constancy and perseverance to the other powers, contributing to maintain their activity
28	<b>Time</b>	The faculty of time conceives the duration phenomena
29	<b>Eventuality</b>	This faculty recognizes the activity of every other, and acts in turn upon all of them



30 <b>Inhabitiveness</b>	The instinct that prompts one to select a particular dwelling, often called attachment to home
31 <b>Reverence Veneration</b>	By this organ's agency man adores God, venerates saints, and respects persons and things
32 <b>Conscientiousness</b>	This organ produces a feeling of justice and conscientiousness, or the love of truth and duty
33 <b>Hope</b>	Hopes induces a belief in the possibility of whatever the other faculties desire, it inspires optimism about future events.
34 <b>Marvelousness</b>	This sentiment inspires belief in the true and the false prophet, and aids superstition, but is also essential to the belief in the doctriness of religion
35 <b>Size</b>	This organ provides notions of the dimensions or size of external objects
36 <b>Weight and resistance</b>	This faculty procures the knowledge of the specific gravity of objects, and is of use whenever weight or resistance are worked upon with the hands, or by means of tools.
37 <b>Order</b>	This faculty gives method and order to objects only as they are physically related

#### ***Additional Reference 4***

"Phrenology, the History of Brain Localization"

<https://www.cerebromente.org.br/n01/frenolog/frenologia.htm>

Renato M.E. Sabbatini, PhD in Brain & Mind, March 1997

#### ***Additional Reference 5***

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6143440/>

This 2018 study showed the most rigorous evaluation of phrenological claims to date