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‘A Vindication of Phrenology.’

Among the failures of the last century, according to Alfred Russell Wallace, was its refusal to recognize phrenology as one of the true sciences. This distinguished British evolutionary scientist has lately been confident enough on the subject of the despised field of investigation known as phrenology to predict that it will gain general acceptance before the twentieth century has expired. “It will prove itself to be the true science of the mind,” he avers. Its practical uses in education, in self-discipline, in the reformatory treatment of criminals, and in the remedial treatment of the insane will give it one of the highest places in the hierarchy of the sciences.” The persistent neglect of phrenology during the past sixty years and the obloquy into which it has fallen must, according to Wallace again, be referred to as an instance of the prejudice which prevailed among men of science when they were advancing so proudly through the mazes of evolution.

To what extent is this attitude changed? In the opinion of French writers in the scientific press of Paris, phrenology tends to revive as a branch of psychology rather than as a separate science. Yet it is to the hostility of psychologists that phrenology owes its present fallen state, according to Cyrus Elder, who edits the translation of Dr. J. G. Spurzheim’s work¹ on the science. As licentiate of the royal college of physicians in London and as a professor of medicine at the University of Vienna, Dr. Spurzheim made a vast series of observations which fell into disrepute as a basis for generalization. Within the past few years the tendency has been to revert to the ideas of Spurzheim, partly because the Bertillon system of measurement justified itself in the classification and identification of criminals and partly owing to the references to Spurzheim made necessary by the controversy over finger-print identification. If finger prints and Bertillon measurements afforded data for inference concerning individuals why should not the organs of the mental functions be dealt with in the same manner? The special organs of the mental functions, except those of feeling and of voluntary motion, are, according to Spurzheim, all contained in the head. Those of the faculties most commonly possessed by animals are at the base of the brain and others, as their functions rank higher, occupy superior situations. These organs of the powers peculiar to man seem from the observations made by Spurzheim to compose the entire upper and fore parts of the cerebral mass.

Physiognomical characteristics, as observed in the Paris hospitals and recorded from time to time in the medical press, appear to have some definite relation to other characteristics. The lobe of the ear is understood to be very significant in this respect altho no generalization from the data collected has yet been made by any scientist of eminence. Doctor Spurzheim in this newly issued work bearing his name, generalizes solely from what he calls “organs.” This conception of organs for the perceptive powers and their subdivision is his. He refers to organs of constructiveness, of acquisitiveness, of ideality and the like. These primitive powers of the mind and the respective organs having been proved by observation and induction can not, insists Spurzheim, be attacked by reasoning alone. “Supported by invariable facts, they must be admitted as existing.”

For example, it was observed that those who displayed a peculiar disposition to mechanical art had a face of a somewhat parallel form, as large at the temples as at the cheeks. It was inferred that the disposition to mechanical arts was indicated when the brain at the temples is prominent or large. Further observations on mechanics, architects, sculptors, and painters, in whom this organ is large, soon pointed out its precise situation. In animals the ability to construct is not in proportion to their understanding. The beaver, with less intellect, surpasses the dog in constructiveness. The skulls of animals which build and make burrows and of others which do not, present a remarkable difference at the place of this organ, as is seen in the heads of rabbits and of hares. The beaver and its allied forms have it distinctly evident.

It is along this line of reasoning that the opponents of phrenology see an opening for their criticism. They laugh at a theory which attributes to a similar organ the sublime conceptions of a Raphael, the petty productions

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of a milliner and the habitation of a beaver. In reply it is pointed out that the sloth creeps by means of organs similar to those used by the galloping horse and the swiftly bounding deer when they race at the top of their speed. The ass brays by means of organs equivalent to those utilized by the Italian prima donna when she interprets a solo by Puccini. It is not the argument of phrenology that the organ gave rise to the sublime conceptions of a Raphael but that it was essential to the execution of these conceptions. It produces the results known generally as construction or creativeness in the material sense. By means of it birds build their nests, Santos-Dumont evolves his air ships and a Holland constructs the submarine. In other words the propensity to construct generally is localized in the appropriate organ. Other faculties are localized in other organs. The observations upon which Spurzheim and others draw these inferences make up phrenology, a science which cannot be argued away through the medium of the intelligence alone but only by an assemblage of opposing facts. Where are these facts? Spurzheim and Wallace deny their existence.

¹*Phrenology*. By Dr. J.G. Spurzheim. Lippincott.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.