Snaring the Fowler: Mark Twain Debunks Phrenology

In the 1870s Mark Twain performed a single-blind reliability test on the analysis technique of Lorenzo Niles Fowler, one of the eminent phrenologists of the day.

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In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the protagonist, Hank Morgan, watches his medieval companion wallowing with some pigs she believes are enchanted nobles, and says, "I was ashamed of her, ashamed of the human race." Twain's own shame and embarrassment at his fellow humans wallowing in superstition and pseudoscience can be seen throughout his career.

Like many good skeptics, Twain was an experienced hoaxster and prankster himself. When he was a young newspaper reporter, he wrote a spoof of the numerous spurious archaeological claims accompanying the western expansion. In his "Petrified Man" he described the discovery of such a find. Presented as an legitimate news article, the account
included a number of geographical improbabilities that anyone familiar with the local area would have recognized as farcical, or so Twain thought. He was disappointed to discover that his readers and credulous papers across the country (and even internationally) had uncritically accepted the story. If a careful reader pieced together the positions given for the hands and fingers of the petrified man, it would have been apparent that he was literally thumbing his nose at posterity.

Twain's critique extended to paranormal and religious claims, heaping scorn on Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science. He was also skeptical of the Book of Mormon and its claims of divine authorship.

The ease with which this spoof was accepted as fact most likely contributed to Twain's lifelong concern with critiquing and disproving both accepted truths and exceptional claims. No mere humorist, he was an outspoken political, social and literary critic, his targets ranging from American imperialism (“To The Person Sitting In Darkness”), anti-Semitism (“Concerning the Jews”) and anti-Chinese bigotry, (“Goldsmith's Friend Abroad Again”) to the “literary offenses” of James Fenimore Cooper and the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. His critique extended to paranormal and religious claims, heaping scorn on Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science, arguing that it was unlikely that Eddy was the sole author of Science and Health. He was also skeptical of the Book of Mormon and its claims of divine authorship. It was this hostility to delusion that led to an encounter between Twain and another giant of the nineteenth century, a celebrity in his own right, Lorenzo Niles Fowler.

Both were self-made men rising from humble beginnings to become great celebrities of the day, riding to fame on the leading trends and movements of their time. One, however, remains a household name, the other has faded into obscurity. The two men shared many similarities both in character and outlook, yet they were destined to be at odds over Fowler's purview, phrenology.

Phrenology and the Fowlers

To understand much of that century it is important to understand phrenology, for that belief colored much of the country's thinking at that time regarding what motivated human behavior. As taught by its practitioners and followers, no less than the totality of human experience could be explained by the proper application of this science. To this end, Lorenzo and his brother Orson Squire Fowler published books dealing with a variety of applications of phrenology to daily life, from how to discover the ideal mate to what qualities should be sought in an employee. Phrenological influence can be seen in the writings of Whitman, Poe, and Melville.

The Fowlers rose to prominence as the heads of a phrenological empire based at the Phrenological Institute in New York City, where Lorenzo performed phrenological readings on clients. In addition, the brothers trained the next generation of phrenologists. Connected to the Institute was the Phrenological Cabinet, nicknamed “Golgotha,” which housed a huge collection of skulls, used both for research purposes and as a museum open to the public. It was often PT. Barnum's most serious competition for tourists. Eventually it became fashionable to have a reading done by the famous phrenologists, and many celebrities of the day had their heads examined, including Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, Hiram Powers, Theodore Weldand, and Edwin Forrest. The Fowlers became celebrities in their own right, even being satirized in the popular press, along with a business partner, Samuel Wells, as the firm of “Bumpus and Crane”.

The brothers Fowler also managed a large publishing house, which issued phrenological works written by the Fowlers and others, including the Phrenological Journal. They were not merely phrenologists, however, but considered themselves part of a larger progressive movement that was sweeping away traditional superstition and bigotry and replacing it with rational reform. In service to this ideal they published a rather inclusive and eclectic collection of the nineteenth century's equivalent of self-help books, including works on hydrotherapy, homeopathy, and how to inexpensively build one's own octagonal concrete house. They published works on subjects as diverse as poetry, early feminism, and the new art of photography. They published the first edition of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and a photography magazine, Life Illustrated. Their circle of friends included such reformers as feminist Amelia Bloomer and nutritionist Sylvester Graham.

Enter Mark Twain

It was with some irony that the encounter between these two examples of the spirit of American progress was to be set in London. Fowler had moved to London in 1863 and opened a branch of the firm. (Fowler and Wells at various times also had branches in Boston and Philadelphia.) Twain often toured Europe and lived there for extended periods, in an attempt to “better” himself through exposure to European culture. Many nineteenth century Americans had similar feelings of intellectual inferiority.

Twain had some experience with phrenology, having written of the itinerant phrenologists of his youth coming to Hannibal and giving demonstrations. (Some speculate that

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these unnamed phrenologists may even have included one of
the Fowlers, though no proof exists.) He also was familiar with
the technique now referred to as cold reading, giving a scorn-
ful description of it in the beginning of his "Lionizing
Murderers," wherein the fortune teller starts her reading with,
"You have had much trouble, some joy, some good fortune,
some bad." Further, he was aware of how phrenologists had
used such generic readings to appease their clients. In his auto-
biography, he describes the phrenologists visiting Hannibal
in his youth:

It is not at all likely, I think, that the travelling expert
ever got any villager's character quite right, but it
is a safe guess that he was always wise enough
to furnish his clients character charts that
would compare favorably with George
Washington's. It was a long time ago,
and yet I think I still remember that
no phrenologist ever came across a
skull in our town that fell much
short of the Washington stan-
dard. This general and close
approach to perfection ought
to have roused suspicion, per-
haps, but I do not remember
that it did. It is my impression
that the people admired
phrenology and believed in it
and that the voice of the
doubter was not heard in the
land. (Neider 1959)

Froehlich with a knowl-
edge both of phrenology and
the tricks of con artists, he per-
formed a simple single-blind
reliability test. In 1872 or 1873, Twain
visited Fowler's London office and
paid for a reading using a pseudonym.
It is unclear whether he attempted to dis-
guise his physical appearance, and whether
he wore his trademark white suit. As his likeness
had been used in advertising, such cautions would
have seemed prudent, yet Fowler gave no indication that he
recognized Twain. The result was in keeping with his expec-
tations of a cold reading:

Fowler received me with indifference, fingered my head in an
uninterested way, and named and estimated my qualities in a
bored and monotonous voice. He said I possessed amazing
courage, and abnormal spirit of daring, a pluck, a stern will, a
fearlessness that were without limit, I was astonished at this,
and gratified too: I had not suspected it before; but then he
foraged over on the other side of my skull and found a hump
there which he called "caution." This hump was so tall, so
mountainous, that it reduced my courage-bump to a mere
hillock by comparison, although the courage bump had been
so prominent up to that time—according to his description of
it—that it ought to have been a capable thing to hang my hat
on; but it amounted to nothing, now in the presence of that
Matterhorn which he called my Caution. He explained that if
that Matterhorn had been left out of my scheme of character
I would have been one of the bravest men that ever lived—
possibly the bravest—but that my cautiousness was so prodi-
gously superior to it that it abolished my courage and made
me almost spectacularly timid. He continued his discoveries,
with the result that I came out safe and sound, at the end, with
a hundred great and shining qualities; but which lost their
value and amounted to nothing because each of the hundred
was coupled up with an opposing defect which took the effect-
iveness all out of it. (Neider 1959)

According to Twain, Fowler was willing to commit himself on
one quality: "However, he found a cavity, in one place; a cav-
ity where a bump would have been in anyone else's skull. That
cavity, he said was all alone, all by itself, occupying a soli-
tude, and had no opposing bump, however slight
in elevation, to modify and ameliorate its
perfect completeness and isolation. He
started me by saying that that cavity
represented the total absence of the
sense of humor!"

Twain states that this same
defect was the only notable devi-
ation of his character from the
generic when similar tests were
done of palmistry, involving
mailing an anonymous pho-
tograph or print of his palm,
to noted palmists in London
and New York. Of eighteen
readings, humor was men-
tioned only twice, and then
only to note a definite lack
thereof.

Twain returned to Fowler
three months later and sat for a
second reading, this time identi-
ifying himself. On this occasion, the
reading differed greatly: "Once more
he made a striking discovery—the cavity
was gone, and in its place was a Mount
Everest—figuratively speaking—31,000 feet
high, the loftiest bump of humor he had ever encoun-
tered in his life-long experience!"

It should be mentioned, however, that this was only a sin-
gle-blind test, with a subject predisposed to be hostile
to phrenology. It is possible that on his second visit, Twain may
have conducted himself in a more jovial and humorous man-
ner. However, such attempts at deception were not unknown
to the Fowlers, and they claimed to have seen easily through
such deceptions before.

In addition, Twain's memory of the reading may have been
flawed. Madeline B. Stern, literary historian and definitive
biographer of the Fowlers, claims that Twain's terminology
(i.e., "bumps" and "cavities") is inconsistent with that
employed by the Fowlers. She further doubts that Lorenzo
Fowler, known for his prodigious memory, would have forgot-
ten Twain's features in three months.

Yet Twain claims to have kept the charts of the two read-
ings. (For an additional fee, the Fowlers' would provide a chart
of one's phrenograph.)
I went to Fowler under an assumed name and he examined my elevations and depressions and gave me a chart which I carried home to the Langham Hotel and studied with great interest and amusement—the same interest and amusement which I should have found in the chart of an imposter who had been passing himself off for me and who did not resemble me in a single sharply defined detail. I waited for three months and went to Mr. Fowler again, heralding my arrival with a card bearing both my name and my nom de guerre. Again I carried away an elaborate chart. It contained several sharply defined details of my character, but it bore no recognizable resemblance to the earlier chart. (Neider 1959)

It is a minor tragedy to the history of skepticism that these charts do not appear to have survived.

Twain, however, was not satisfied and in 1901 he sat for a final reading in New York City. Lorenzo Fowler had passed on by this time, and the business had passed to his sister, Charlotte Fowler Wells and his daughter, Jessie Allen Fowler. It was the latter who most likely gave the final phrenological reading of Twain. (It may have been one Edgar C. Beall, who by this time owned controlling stock in the company and who who later claim to have examined Twain personally. Twain’s own notebook has the appointment listed with Jessie A. Fowler.)

The analysis would later be printed in the _Phrenological Journal_ and attributed to the editor. Whether by Jessie Fowler or Beall, the author is certainly a better literary critic than Lorenzo Fowler was. This last phrenograph of Twain focuses not on his humor, but on his seriousness and concern for humanity, as demonstrated by his largely developed areas of Conscientiousness and Benevolence. The phrenologist interprets Twain’s humor as being merely habitual and a means to the end of his greater social concerns. Perhaps the author possessed a greater facility at phrenological analysis than Lorenzo, or perhaps he or she merely had a better knowledge of Twain’s writing. Significantly, in the almost thirty years that had passed since Twain’s first reading his work had matured, and his more serious work was much more well known to the general public. His scathing critique of American imperialism, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” had been published within the previous year.

Though this analysis was printed, Twain never commented on it publicly. In fact, when in 1906 Twain was asked to contribute to a symposium on phrenology, he mentioned his childhood experiences in Hannibal, and his test of Lorenzo Fowler in London, but did not mention his most recent experience in New York. Madeline B. Stern speculates about the reason for this omission: “Perhaps the analysis had been too telling, the hint at his ‘tragic character’ too disturbing. Perhaps too Mark Twain balked at disclosing his abiding fascination with the pseudoscience he had scoffed at whose persistent lure he could not resist” (Stern 1971).

Perhaps instead the phrenologists were the beneficiaries of Twain’s benevolence. By 1906, phrenology’s star had fallen far from its heyday when Twain first went head-to-head with Lorenzo. At this point, many no longer considered phrenology a legitimate science, and America was now looking to the most recent European import, the emerging field of psychoanalysis, to explain human behavior. As the fortunes of the Phrenological Institute had decreased, their offices were forced by falling revenues and increasing rents to move further up town and into less posh surroundings. The office in which Twain received his last reading was no longer the tourist attraction of lower Broadway, but instead a more modest location on East Twenty-First Street. Twain was certainly not one to kick someone when they were down, and perhaps it was out of compassion, and embarrassment for the Fowler family, still carrying on what must have appeared to him to be a foolish endeavor, that he refrained from mentioning their continuing efforts.

Twain may have grown more charitable to those he thought gullible, for by this time he himself had sunk thousands of dollars and years of time into a typesetting machine that would prove a failure. By the turn of the century, both Lorenzo and Orson Fowler were dead, having spent the bulk of their lives advocating a mostly discredited theory. Perhaps Twain, described in that last phrenograph as being “a believer in humanity,” “a keen critic of his own,” and “of very strong sympathies,” saw too much of his own gullibility reflected in that of the struggling twentieth-century phrenologists, and wished to relegate their particular fallacy to humanity’s past.

Ultimately, both Twain and the Fowlers were reformers of a sort. The Fowlers’ form of phrenology was a curiously American one. Unlike their European counterparts, they did not believe that a person’s character was unchangeable, but instead, they taught that a phrenological analysis could turn up defects in character that could then be rectified through proper exercise of the appropriate facility, which would then show up, like an athlete’s improved musculature, on subsequent examination. Even the most basic premise of phrenology—that different areas of the brain correspond to different functions—has been held to be true, and is a foundation of modern neuroscience. Their tragic flaw, of course, was the relatively arbitrary assignment of these functions to areas, and the belief in the corresponding shape of the skull. Had they the ability to look at this premise and compare it objectively to controlled data, perhaps they would have been spared such a long exercise in futility.

But as to gullibility, or intuition, many of the causes and ideas championed by the Fowlers were later vindicated, such as the literary work of Whitman, the feminist ideals of Bloomer, or the concrete construction techniques of Orson Fowler. And indeed, many of Twain’s, such as his typesetting machine, proved fruitless. However, unlike the Fowlers’ largely uncritical acceptance of most innovations which fell within the penumbra of “progress” and “reform,” Twain remained critical of both the status quo and its reforms, judging each on its own merits.

Twain’s snare of Fowler can be seen as an indictment of phrenology as a science, or of Fowler as a quack. But ultimately it may be, like the medieval maid who believed pigs to be nobles, an embarrassment to humanity itself, that ones as intelligent and sincere as the Fowlers could be so deluded for a lifetime.

References


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