

PHRENOLOGY: SCIENCE OR FICTION? (ФРЕНОЛОГІЯ: НАУКА ЧИ ВИГАДКА?)

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Phrenology is the study of the surface of the human head for the purpose of interpreting one's character and mental abilities. This is not merely interpreting happiness from one's wrinkle lines or brain damage according to head wounds.

The theory of phrenology is more complex. First begun by Franz Joseph Gall in 1796, phrenology proposes that the human brain has regions corresponding to different virtues such that the shape of the brain both determines the shape of the skull and it points out different strengths and weaknesses in one's personality.

Phrenology was quite popular in the 1800's, in large part because it was very flexible, hands-on, and could be made to support other popular movements at the time such as social evolution, scientific racism, or even eugenics.

Where racism was popular, ethnic distinctions in skull shape could be matched with theories about racial superiority or inferiority, and the different «races» could be treated as different species of man in the course of human evolution. The more «white» one's features were, so the theory goes, the more one is prone to intelligence, moral fiber, and even material success.

Phrenology played a big role in bolstering the societal push for eugenics (selective breeding for the purpose of improving humanity). In the U.S. several eugenics laws were passed, enabling the state to sterilize certain people deemed «feeble-minded» or mentally «defective». In total, about 60,000 U.S. citizens were sterilized, many thinking they were getting an innocent flu shot. Of course, phrenology didn't cause those events. But phrenology was one of the main tools used to lend a scientific air to the idea that black people, poor people, or country-folks were «feeble-minded» burdens to humanity. Eventually the eugenics laws were repealed (long after Nazis tried their hand at eugenics in World War II).

Phrenology was likewise cast aside. As a «science» it lacked predictive power, failed testing, and was loaded with too many assumptions.

Phrenology did however introduce at least one important idea for modern science, and neuropsychology in particular, that human personality somehow arises from features of the brain.